

Social media in research

Introduction

Social media (Twitter, blogging, LinkedIn, etc) gives researchers the means to find and connect with new audiences and communicate directly with those that have an interest in their research.

Building a following and achieving impact through any social media channel requires commitment, but with the right input it can be a remarkably effective and cost-efficient channel for research communication.

Potential benefits include:

- identifying and reaching new audiences – including those beyond academia
- access to senior decision makers and influencers
- increasing awareness for, and support of, your work
- building networks and forming a community that can amplify your insights and findings
- keeping up to date with developments and news in your field
- building your own profile
- the ability to participate remotely in debates around conferences, events, or news happenings
- contributing to impact (eg boosting **Altmetric** scores).

The pace of change and development in social media channels and tools is constant and it can be difficult to keep up. A range of the most relevant and frequently employed tools in a research context can be found in the **communications channels guide**. Further resources are listed at the end of this document.

The NHS Confederation identifies Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook and YouTube as the social media channels most actively used by health care audiences in the UK. Scoping research for this toolkit indicates that blogging can also be particularly effective in leading to new connections and influence.

Twitter

A free micro-blogging service that enables users to post short messages (up to 140 characters) and include URL links and images. It is widely used by academics, practitioners, policymakers and influencers.

Getting started

Sign up at www.twitter.com. Choose a name that strikes the balance between being easy to remember, and personal yet professional (as you will be using this in a work capacity). Twitter has excellent resources to guide beginners. Start modestly, perhaps following a small number of colleagues and people you already know well. This gives you the opportunity to understand the practicalities of messaging, hashtags, retweets, etc before growing your follower base.

There is no pressure to post original content from day one. Identifying the right people to follow, reading what they are tweeting, familiarising yourself with styles and topics, then responding to or retweeting some of their messages (after which they may follow you back) is a constructive beginning.

Use it for

- promoting any aspect of your research study or other communications – new blogs, presentations, website updates, publications, etc. (If links are to content that sits behind a paywall, make this clear – for example write ‘£paywall’ – or provide an open web full version or summary)
- joining the conversation around subjects related to your research area
- understanding how opinion and debates are shifting in real time
- becoming a ‘go to’ resource in your research area – tweeting/retweeting about relevant new journal articles, government policy, conference presentations, etc.

Make full use of Twitter by:

- using it to identify influencers and create a community of interest. Twitter allows you to identify potential influencers by looking at their number of followers and observing whose tweets are regularly retweeted. Hashtags and keywords allow you to quickly find those with an interest in your research subject(s). Directory tools like [Followerwonk](#) can be trialled for free and enable searches of Twitter bios for specific terms.
- measuring impact – beyond number of followers you are able to monitor how many people are clicking on links you share through free-to-use tools like [bit.ly](#). For a small fee, tools like
- [Twittercounter](#) enable you to see how many mentions your organisation or research subject is getting over a period of time.

Blogging

Writing based on your own knowledge, observations or opinion that is published online, either via your own online blogging platform or on one that gathers blogs from many contributors. Widely used in academia, blogs tend to be short (400–800 words) and employ a more informal writing style.

Getting started

Some funding awards require the creation of a website, which can then be used as a blogging platform. Established blogging platforms like [WordPress.org](#) and [Blogger](#) offer start-up blogging sites for little or no outlay and have easy-to-use interfaces. Most websites vary in terms of cost, additional functionality and security features. As with Twitter, the name you choose for your blogging site is important. Select something authentic to you and your work, that will be relevant and memorable for your audiences.

In addition to your own site there are established online publishing sites for researchers. These include, but are not limited to: [The Conversation](#); [Academia.edu](#); [LSE British Politics and Policy blog](#); [The Thesis Whisperer](#); and [Manchester Policy Blogs](#). All place an emphasis on accessibility in presenting findings and most have large Twitter followings to cross-promote blogging entries – so they can have a large audience reach. Likewise, most universities and some health care institutions publish blogs on their websites.

A blog provides an opportunity to communicate about your research in a more informal or conversational way. By finding and using your authentic voice and personal experience, it can make your research more accessible and bring it to life for a wide range of audiences. Remember, however, that a blog post is still a publication. And be mindful of how much research detail you want to make public before your findings are peer-reviewed.

Funders like the Health Foundation host blogs on their websites and may be worth approaching with ideas related to their organisational interests, particularly if you are in receipt of one of their grants.

Use it for:

- translating more technical research findings into an engaging and accessible format for a wider range of audiences
- establishing knowledge in a specialist area before research findings are available
- promoting your research during the course of a study, rather than focusing all communications resources towards the end
- providing more depth to your online profile and providing content that you can use to promote via Twitter, e-news, etc.

Make full use of blogging by:

- setting up an **RSS feed** for your blog. This enables visitors to your site with 'feed readers' to indicate an ongoing interest in it. The RSS feed will alert them when you've published a new post
- **tagging your posts** so that they are categorised. This will improve the chances of your posts being found by search engines
- using images that bring life and interest to your posts. There are various websites that provide royalty-free images for use and some, like **Free Images**, have dedicated health and medical sections
- See the **resources** at the end of this section for links to guidance on other social media channels.

LinkedIn

LinkedIn is a professional networking site. It enables users to establish and grow an online professional network that starts with existing connections and can be built up to include connections' connections. You can post short updates or messages to the site, and even publish blogs, which everyone in your network will be notified about.

Getting started

You can create a profile as an individual researcher or as a research team or department. LinkedIn will ask you to provide previous career/research experience and enables you to nominate specialist areas of interest or expertise that make you 'searchable' by other contacts.

Once you have established your own profile you can start linking to existing contacts – either manually or using LinkedIn's syncing software. Ensure that you review your public profile settings (in Privacy & Settings > Edit your public profile) so that people can see your profile and find/connect with you if you wish them to.

Use it for:

- building your professional profile and connections
- keeping up to date with new posts/positions within your network
- identifying or establishing a community of common interest.

Make full use of LinkedIn by:

- joining in relevant debates or discussions on topics relevant to your research
- re-publishing any blogs or short, accessible pieces of writing.

Promoting your social media updates

Research insight and well-crafted copy alone will not drive visitors to your social media channels. You will need to promote them at every suitable opportunity.

Think of your channels as equal in importance to your email address in terms of contact details – include them in business cards, email signatures, conference presentations, etc.

Managing risk

All communications involve an element of reputational risk. That risk is not necessarily greater with social media, but issues can spread quickly. However, it is possible to manage the risks with some practise and sensible tools.

- Make a conscious decision about how much of your study you wish to communicate about on the internet. Issues to consider include plagiarism, self-plagiarism, publishing before peer-review and some journals' sensitivities around exclusive publishing. In most cases there will be much that you can say about your study with no risk at all, but be mindful about putting findings and conclusions out there before peer-reviewed publication.
- Consider copyrighting your work via a free-to-use service such as **Creative Commons**. This should afford any written work, such as blogs, some degree of protection.
- Monitor your channels regularly and use the free monitoring tools that come with many channels and platforms to keep up to date with new comments, follows, mentions, etc. If an issue arises, act quickly. Don't be afraid to block any abuse or inappropriate contribution, but respond with sensitivity if it concerns issues such as patient groups or individual patient cases.

Integrating social media with your other communications

Social media profiles and high numbers of followers are not the end goals. In the context of communicating your findings and knowledge, it is simply another channel. You will maximise your communication reach if you work across a range of channels. So, if you have a journal article you can point to it with Twitter, and write a corresponding blog that contains some audio, which can then be brought to the attention of journalists. Content needs to be crafted for each channel to achieve effective communication. By putting out consistent, appropriately tailored messages across various channels, you will provide more chances of reaching all your target audiences.

Resources

- A comprehensive list of social media resources and tools is available from the [Research Information Network](#)
- The Economic and Social Research Council's [guide to social media for researchers](#) includes a good level of detail on how to use Twitter from scratch
- [A survey by Cogitamus](#) for the NHS Confederation in 2012 focuses on current use, future trends and opportunities in public sector social media.
- The Guardian Higher Education Network Blog provides [10 top tips for academic blogging](#).
- NHS IQ's [The Edge](#) is a hub for change activists in health to exchange information and ideas.