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# Social Media for Researchers

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## Introduction

Social media is defined as the collective of online communications channels dedicated to community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration. <sup>1</sup>

According to a 2016 Statistical bulletin from The *Office for National Statistics*:

*“Use of the internet for social networking continued to grow and has become part of many adults’ everyday lives, rising to 63% in 2016.”<sup>2</sup>*

The bulletin identified that social media use in the 16-24 age group was 91%, and in the 25-39 age group was 89%. Only in the 65+ age group was it used by fewer than half the public (23%).

This document reports on a brief review of how social media is used in academia. It identifies resources available to researchers looking for guidance on social media use, and presents a selection of examples of the use of social media by academics.

Given that social media use is almost ubiquitous in certain sectors of society, can it be used by academia in the drive towards better engagement with the public? This report suggests that, currently, the use of social media for engagement by academics concentrates on peer-to-peer networking or on dissemination of results. That there is further potential to engage the public with research in mutually beneficial ways through social media is without doubt, and we are keen to hear from people who have examples of where this has been done effectively.

## Social Media Guides

In reviewing social media guides for researchers three main rationales for its use emerged:

- **Dissemination:** Using social media to publicise the work of researchers and universities and to enhance awareness of their work.
- **Peer-to-peer networking:** Using social media to enhance professional collaboration.
- **Public engagement:** Using social media to collaborate with the public, to engage in two-way dialogue or to involve the public in research (such as with citizen science).

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<sup>1</sup> WhatIs.com, EA in Transition: Guide to keeping up with disruptive technologies -

<http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/social-media>

<sup>2</sup> Office for National Statistics, 2016. *Internet access – households and individuals: 2016*. Via <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/bulletins/internetaccesshouseholdsandindividuals/2016#activities-completed-on-the-internet>



Of the seven UK research councils, only *ESRC*, *MRC* and *NERC* (A1-3) offer any guidance on their websites with regards to researchers' use of social media. Of those, only the *MRC* (A2) provides any guidance about public engagement; its case studies are of particular note, including videos of social media practitioners.

Many universities provide social media guides for their researchers, but often this is limited to explaining social media policies within the context of their wider communication strategy. Some universities do go further in encouraging the use of social media (A4-8), either as a means to undertake peer-to-peer networking or to disseminate work. *Newcastle University's* guidance (A4) stands out by promoting social media as a potential tool for public collaboration and engagement.

Many other academic organisations also provide support and guidance to researchers about social media use, although this is frequently limited to very basic general introductions. Some make more specific reference to how social media could become part of the research process (A9-13). Of particular note are: *Vitae Innovate's* report (A9) which explores how social media tools can be used in developing research dialogues; and *Forestry Research's* report (A12) which promotes the use of social media in conducting citizen science.

Funding bodies tend to focus on the role of social media in publicity and awareness building (A14-17). *Wellcome* (A14) suggests that social media can be used as part of the public engagement process, but does not provide practical advice on how this could be achieved. Similarly, the *Arts Council* (A17) briefly mentions how social media can be used to demonstrate a connection between funded projects and society, but again does not provide practical guidance.

Beyond academia, the *NHS* clearly has a remit to engage with their patients. They have produced a useful guide which discusses how social media could be used in this role (A18), and which advocates an "engage, listen and learn" strategy. *Helpful Technology*, have developed a set of resources to promote digital engagement (A19); while designed for use in the public sector it contains content of relevance to academia, covering techniques, strategies and examples, as well as a useful question and answer section.

Finally, *LSE* and the *University of Birmingham* both host blogs in which social media is discussed with regard to research impact, although this primarily with a dissemination or networking focus. The *LSE* blog (A20) attempts to cover four broad themes:

- Why researchers are using social media.
- Digital strategies for capturing the value of social media.
- Critical engagement with emerging challenges.
- Social media how-to guides for professional development and collaboration.

The *University of Birmingham* blog (A21) summarises a brief survey of academics, and suggests that ".....maybe social media isn't something that academics routinely use and it isn't always a big part of their publishing/marketing strategy."



## Social Media Case Studies and Examples

Several attempts have been made to compile case studies of social media use in academia. The *MRC* website (B1) includes case studies based on individual academics, providing links to their social media pages and video interviews. The *Open University* have compiled a list of social media case studies (B2), although these are largely presented within the context of University teaching. However, maintaining such lists requires regular maintenance and they can quickly become out of date, as demonstrated by the *Academic Blog Portal* (B3).

While there are numerous examples of academics using social media for peer-to-peer networking or dissemination, there are considerably fewer focusing on public engagement activity. Nevertheless, there are researchers who are looking to make use of social media within their research. A good example is the *Fraxinus* project (B4), which engaged the public in citizen science through its Facebook based game. The *Lincolndogblog* (B5) at one time used Twitter to recruit people and pets into its study (although appears to have pulled back from Twitter recently). Another researcher, Katy Jordan (B6), used social media to do research on online course completion rates.

Many research teams have promoted interest in their general research area through social media, and such efforts can be seen as steps towards engagement (B7-B13).

Once again organisations from outside academia can present good examples of how to engage with the public using social media (B14-B17). *IFLScience* (B14) demonstrates how to embrace the prevalent social media idioms while popularising science. *Cancer Research UK* (B15) show how different social media channels are variously suited to different types of engagement: fundraising and research news are maintained on separate Twitter channels; Facebook is used for daily posts and dialog with patients, carers and supporters, while more detailed community questions and answers are encouraged in their bespoke web forum area.

It is also worth noting the potential challenges faced by those engaging via social media, subjects for discussion can lead to online abuse or 'trolling' which notably occurred to Mary Beard who was abused on Twitter over Roman Britain's ethnic diversity.<sup>3</sup> This therefore could overshadow the engagement activity and have a negative impact on the author.

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<sup>3</sup> The Guardian, Mary Beard abused on Twitter over Roman Britain's ethnic diversity - <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/aug/06/mary-beard-twitter-abuse-roman-britain-ethnic-diversity>



## Other Resources

While they have not been reviewed for the purposes of this document, Appendix C contains a short list of books published on the theme of social media in academia.

## Appendix A – Social Media Guides

### A1. Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC)

The ESRC provides very basic information about social networking:

<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/research/impact-toolkit/social-media/using-social-media/>

as part of its 'Impact toolkit':

<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/research/impact-toolkit/>

It does not discuss social media in the context of public engagement.

### A2. Medical Research Council (MRC)

The MRC site includes a reasonably comprehensive section about public engagement:

<https://www.mrc.ac.uk/research/public-engagement/>

The PE section contains a set of resources including social media guidance and case studies:

<https://www.mrc.ac.uk/research/public-engagement/templates-resources/>

The guidance suggests how social media can be used to facilitate a two-way dialogue and engagement with patients and the public.

### A3. Natural Environment Research Council (NERC)

NERC provide basic information about creating a social media presence, primarily for the purpose of promoting research:

<http://www.nerc.ac.uk/skills/mediatraining/workwithmedia/socialmedia/started/>

Includes a useful 'Accounts to follow' section.

### A4. Newcastle University

Provides extensive guidance about using social media in research including Why? How? and What?:

<http://libguides.ncl.ac.uk/socialmedia>

Encourages researchers to consider social media as a set of tools to aid collaboration with the public.

### A5. Institute of Education, UCL

Provides reasonably comprehensive guidance to all the major social media sites, and includes some less obvious examples:

<http://libguides.ioe.ac.uk/socialmedia>



#### **A6. Open University**

Reasonably exhaustive set of guides to all major social media outlets:

<http://www.open.ac.uk/community/social-media-toolkit/>

#### **A7. Sheffield**

Promoting a considered approach to social media by researchers. Hints at higher level public engagement uses of social media:

[https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly\\_fs/1.328815!/file/PublicEngagementSocialMedia.pdf](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.328815!/file/PublicEngagementSocialMedia.pdf)

#### **A8. LSE**

The LSE document is a typical example of the type of social media guidance Universities make available to their researchers. The majority of the document covers Twitter basics (defining terms such as 'Follow', 'Reply', 'Hashtag'), promotes its use as a means of disseminating results, and almost in passing suggests it could be used to "crowd source' research activities"

[http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/files/2011/11/Published-Twitter\\_Guide\\_Sept\\_2011.pdf](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/files/2011/11/Published-Twitter_Guide_Sept_2011.pdf)

#### **A9. Vitae Innovate**

A detailed guide to social media for researchers and their supervisors:

<https://www.vitae.ac.uk/vitae-publications/reports/innovate-open-university-social-media-handbook-vitae-2012.pdf>

#### **A10. Research Information Network**

RIN was wound up in 2011 and the replacement community interest company was wound up in 2015, but its website remains hosted by the Association of Commonwealth Universities. The following 2011 guide ('Social media: A guide for researchers') and case studies are widely cited by universities still (although it has not been updated recently, and many of the links are now defunct):

<http://www.rin.ac.uk/our-work/communicating-and-disseminating-research/social-media-guide-researchers>

#### **A11. British Science Association**

Although published by BSA, the following report, written by Toby Shannon ('Exploring Social Media'), appears on the University of Bath website:

<http://www.bath.ac.uk/marketing/public-engagement/assets/SocialMediaDossier.pdf>

#### **A12. Forestry Research**

A guide to using SM to do Citizen Science:

[https://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/Social\\_Media\\_Support\\_Citizen\\_Science\\_April\\_2014.pdf/\\$FILE/Social\\_Media\\_Support\\_Citizen\\_Science\\_April\\_2014.pdf](https://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/Social_Media_Support_Citizen_Science_April_2014.pdf/$FILE/Social_Media_Support_Citizen_Science_April_2014.pdf)

#### **A13. European Geosciences Union Blogs**



A brief discussion of the uses for social media within research:

<http://blogs.egu.eu/network/palaeoblog/2013/04/11/the-values-of-social-media-and-blogging-for-academics/>

#### **A14. Wellcome**

This Wellcome report ('Factors affecting public engagement by researchers') notes that while social media has mainly been used as a dissemination channel, it is likely to become used more in public engagement, though it doesn't really expand upon the idea:

[https://wellcome.ac.uk/sites/default/files/wtp060033\\_0.pdf](https://wellcome.ac.uk/sites/default/files/wtp060033_0.pdf)

#### **A15. Heritage Lottery Fund**

Primarily suggest Social media as a means to promote the projects. For example:

<https://www.hlf.org.uk/running-your-project/acknowledging-your-grant/website-social-media>  
and:

<https://www.hlf.org.uk/running-your-project/promoting-your-project>

#### **A16. Big Lottery Fund**

Social media promoted for publicity purposes:

<https://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/funding/funding-guidance/managing-your-funding/social-media>

#### **A17. Arts Council**

Relatively little advice, but does suggest social media is useful for demonstrating that projects are "part of the wider conversation about culture":

<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/why-culture-matters/making-case/social-media>

#### **A18. NHS**

Brief 2012 guide ('Using social media to engage, listen and learn', 2012) to what social media is and how it could be used to engage with patients:

<https://www.networks.nhs.uk/nhs-networks/smart-guides/documents/Using%20social%20media%20to%20engage-%20listen%20and%20learn.pdf>

#### **A19. Helpful Technology**

Intended as a guide to digital engagement for the public sector - lots of examples and guidance: 'The Digital Engagement Guide: Ideas and practical help to use digital and social media in the public sector':

<http://www.digitalengagement.info/section/techniques/>

#### **A20. LSE**

This LSE list:



<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2015/06/26/reading-list-using-social-media-for-research/>

promises “...to pull together a reading list of posts on how researchers are using social media for collaboration and public engagement purposes”. In practice, it really only focuses on peer-to-peer networking and dissemination applications of social media. The blog has included more interesting posts: using the search term ‘Social Media’ in the blog’s own search engine yields:

- “Using social media to curate digital artworks can lead to increased and more dynamic public participation and engagement”
- “Using Twitter as a data source: An overview of current social media research tools”

## A21. University of Birmingham

This blog entry:

<https://blog.bham.ac.uk/thinkresearch/2017/03/why-use-social-media-for-research-impact/>

summarises an attempt to find out what researchers are doing with social media, finding that social media is not routinely used in academia even as part of a marketing strategy.

# Appendix B – Social Media Case Studies and Examples

## B1. MRC

The MRC produced a set of case studies for social media use:

<https://www.mrc.ac.uk/research/public-engagement/templates-resources/#cases>

which are presented as videos all on the MRC YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/MRCcomms>

*Professor Eric Fèvre* – (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XedOPOdObjQ>)

Contributes to Twitter page: (<https://twitter.com/zoonoticdisease>)

Writes for (<http://www.zoonotic-diseases.org/blog/>)

*Professor Marcus Munafò* – (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1w8MBAM5lqo>)

Also his Twitter page: (<https://twitter.com/marcusmunafò>)

And he contributes to: (<https://www.nationalelfservice.net/mental-health/>)

*Suzi Gage* – ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQLneqF7B\\_s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQLneqF7B_s))

Also her blog on Guardian website: (<https://www.theguardian.com/profile/suzi-gage>)

And her Twitter page: (<https://twitter.com/soozaphone>)

The MRC also present the following Twitter chat forum as an engagement highlight:

<https://www.mrc.ac.uk/about/getting-involved/engagement-highlights/pndhour-twitter-chat-2016/>



## **B2. Open University**

OU have compiled a list of social media case studies:

<http://www.open.ac.uk/community/social-media-toolkit/case-studies>

It primarily presents social media within the context of University teaching.

## **B3. Academic Blogs List**

International list of Academic blogs in Wiki form – is not well maintained – does not appear to have been updated since 2014:

<http://academicblogs.org/>

## **B4. Fraxinus Ash Dieback disease game**

Project to study Ash Dieback disease included a facebook based game – by playing the game, the public helped the team to study the disease genetics.

Project page:

<http://oadb.tsl.ac.uk/>

Facebook page (containing game):

<https://apps.facebook.com/fraxinusgame/>

Project discussed here:

<http://www.bbsrc.ac.uk/news/videos/2013/1308-v-gamers-join-ash-dieback-fight-back-transcript/>

## **B5. @Lincolndogblog and Pets Can Do**

The Lincolndogblog (by The Animal Behaviour, Cognition and Welfare group at the University of Lincoln) has not been active since May 2015; it used Twitter to publicise research and to recruit participants into their study:

<https://twitter.com/Lincolndogblog>

but did not appear to use social media as a tool within their work once participants had been recruited. Now the team's internet face is presented via their own website:

<http://www.lincolnpetscando.co.uk/> )

## **B6. Social media and MOOC completion rates**

Katy Jordan used social media to do research on MOOC (Massive Open Online Courses) completion rates:

<http://www.katyjordan.com/MOOCproject.html>

## **B7. National Oceanography Centre University of Southampton**

Jon Copley and team engaging the public with their work through their interactive website:

<http://www.thesearethevoyages.net/index.html>

## **B8. Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment (LSE)**

Facebook includes climate change Q&As (e.g. public can send in questions for UN Climate Chief):

<https://www.facebook.com/granthamLSE>



Climate change news via Twitter:

[https://twitter.com/GRI\\_LSE](https://twitter.com/GRI_LSE)

And mostly talking heads on Youtube:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/GranthamResearch>

### **B9. Department of History, University of Sheffield**

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/HistorySheffield>

Youtube:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/HistorySheffield>

### **B10. Periodic Videos, Department of Chemistry, University of Nottingham**

Content by University of Nottingham, videos by Brady Haran

Self-hosted blog:

<http://www.periodicvideos.com/>

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/periodicvideos>

Youtube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/periodicvideos>

Twitter:

<https://twitter.com/periodicvideos>

### **B11. Numberphile, Mathematical Sciences Research Institute**

Content sponsored by Mathematical Sciences Research Institute, videos by Brady Haran

Blog:

<http://www.numberphile.com/>

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/numberphile>

Twitter:

<https://twitter.com/numberphile>

### **B12. Crooked Timber**

Politics blog - proposed as a case study for public engagement with research through social media by University of Bristol:

<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/publicengagementstories/stories/2014/155.html>

Wordpress blog:

<http://crookedtimber.org/>

### **B13. ScienceGrrl**

A broad-based, grassroots organisation celebrating and supporting women in science.

Blog:

<http://sciencegrrl.co.uk/about/>



Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/SciGrrl>

Twitter:

[https://twitter.com/science\\_grrl](https://twitter.com/science_grrl)

#### **B14. IFLScience**

Style is not everybody's cup of tea, but a popular Science blog.

Blog:

<http://www.iflscience.com/>

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/IFeakingLoveScience>

Twitter (no activity since 2016):

<https://twitter.com/IFLScience> )

#### **B15. Cancer Research UK**

A nuanced use of social media to engage the public; each social media stream has a different focus.

Daily posts by CRUK & Follow-ups by patients, carers, supporters, fundraisers on Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/cancerresearchuk>

Community question & answers in a bespoke forum:

<https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/cancer-chat/> )

Fundraising focus on Twitter:

[https://twitter.com/CR\\_UK](https://twitter.com/CR_UK)

Research news focus on Twitter:

<https://twitter.com/CRUKresearch>

#### **B16. Brighton and Hove Maternity Service Liaison Committee**

Information and support for parents and parents-to-be on Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/brightonandhovemslc>

News on Twitter:

<https://twitter.com/brightonMSLC>

#### **B17. NHS Choices**

Topical health related news on Twitter:

<https://twitter.com/NHSChoices>

## Appendix C – Books

Social Media for Academics

Mark Carrigan

ISBN: 9781446298688



National  
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Published by: Sage Publishing  
Publication Date: April 2016

Social media for academics: a practical guide

Diane Rasmussen Neal

ISBN: 1843346818

Published by: Chandos Publishing

Publication Date: Aug 2012

Communicating Your Research with Social Media: A Practical Guide to Using Blogs, Podcasts, Data Visualisations and Video

Amy Mollett, Cheryl Brumley, Chris Gilson & Sierra Williams

ISBN: 9781412962223

Published by: Sage Publishing

Publication Date: May 2017

Studying and Researching with Social Media

Megan Poore

ISBN: 9781446269725

Published by: Sage Publishing

Publication Date: Nov 2014



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