

Social Media:

A guide for researchers

Case studies

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Andrew Coverdale

Currently I am a PhD student at Nottingham University researching how postgraduate and doctoral students are using social media in their studies. I have a background in heavy engineering but then went to Art College before getting into the Web and Education.



I usually prefer to discover information about my work and research using social media and more traditional ways like discussing with a colleague as I believe they complement each other. But it all depends on the type of information I need and when I want it.

I extensively use blogging, microblogging, social bookmarking, social citation, writing tools, social and professional tools like Facebook, even though I don't like using it. I have tried aggregators and dashboards like Netvibes but I didn't really see the point of them.

The reason that made me want to use social media was that I was interested in the web generally, and the participative/collaborative elements of education. So I was instinctively drawn to social media. Though, I wouldn't use it as much if I wasn't studying for my PhD.

The factors that discouraged me from using social media are time factors usually. There are too many tools to keep with and they are not always useful.

I believe that the use of social media has actually made me a better researcher because I can source information, establish links with people in my field, disseminate my work etc.

If I couldn't use social media anymore...then I'd have more time! However, I'd lose out on a lot of key contacts more than anything – information on what they are doing, latest developments in the field. I would probably spend more time trying to establish social learning opportunities in my School and University, and I would probably chase more opportunities for conferencing etc.

The last time social media helped me solve a problem was when I used a wiki with a couple of my colleagues to put together a funding proposal. Even though we met face-to-face it was useful for collaborative editing texts, sharing and discussing ideas in general.

Andrew Coverdale's blog: PhD Blog (dot) Net <http://phdblog.net>

Anna Croft

Currently I am a lecturer of Organic Chemistry at Bangor University. I did my undergraduate in Adelaide and then moved to Canberra to do my PhD in Organic Chemistry. After that I was able to find a job and moved to the UK.



I currently use blogging (mostly for reading). Microblogging allows me to reach a wider and broader audience quickly and helps in interactive problem solving, especially for topics at the margins of my specialty. I tried to get into social bookmarking but never really saw the point in that. I also use social citation, and social/professional networking tools like Facebook, but mostly for social reasons. Friendfeed allows me to rapidly access a network of colleagues, and get insight and opinions on a convenient schedule, because active topics are constantly highlighted. It is much more convenient than email. Also I use iGoogle mainly to access Google Reader. There are so many tools I want to try but I don't have the time.

The main reasons that made me use social media was peer pressure and because I wanted to see if they actually work. I generally like to play around with new software/ approaches, especially if it's going to simplify my life.

The factors that discouraged me from using social media are that there are too many sites and it means I need to be more selective about which new sites to look at. That means that they have to be seriously interesting. If it is going to be complicated and take more than an hour to sort out then forget it because I can only devote that time if it's mission critical.

I really don't know if social media have helped me become a better researcher but it really means I can just about keep up. It takes a lot of time investment and I know I am ahead of the game in comparison to a lot of people but it is a trade-off information vs. time taken to accrue it. Time also includes task switching which is quite draining and it would be nice to get back to just concentrating on a single thing at a time.

If I couldn't use social media I would probably curl up in a hole and die and kiss my research career goodbye. Well, probably not that bad, but I'd be reduced to sending emails – which no one has the time to reply to. I would also forget running multinational research projects.

I believe that social media will become more important to researchers once they become friendlier.

Ann Croft's staff page: www.chemistry.bangor.ac.uk/akc

Alexander Davenport

I currently work as a research assistant in the Hemato-oncology department in Barts and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry. I originally applied for medicine but I didn't get in and I was offered a change of course which I took. I then applied for a Master's in Immunology at Imperial College London and got on. Currently, I am applying for PhD posts.



I access information mainly by using social media. I use Twitter and I read a lot of blogs. I like to keep up to date directly with the people involved in the research. I use blogging, microblogging, online writing tools, social/ professional networking tools and iGoogle quite extensively. I remember the first thing I started using was Facebook in 2005. I first started using social media because I believe in science communication, I think it is important that as a scientist you engage with the public so as to not seem arrogant when discussing controversial issues. Also, through social media I have found other people and causes such as the Science is Vital campaign, where I got to know the people helping to organise it.

I believe the use of social media has made me a better researcher because I think a good researcher not only needs to be able to do the research but needs to be able to communicate, formulate ideas and arguments with other people they know. For example, a lot of my work uses clinical trial samples and if I hadn't read and agreed with the importance of blinding my results I would have analysed un-blinded which could have skewed my results.

If I couldn't use social media anymore I think it would change my life back to where it was, but it would change it for the worse. I'm sure some of the social media tools currently used will go out of fashion and I may move onto the next craze, but at the moment I use them quite extensively both in my professional and personal life. Social media though has negatively impacted on my work-life balance. I occasionally spend a bit too much time on Twitter and I am really glad they've blocked Facebook from work otherwise I would probably keep using it here too.

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I feel that the major problems in the adoption of social media tools are the perception of the need for them, prejudice of the potential user and occasionally the type of people already using social media. It can be difficult to sieve through the rubbish that gets put out there. Self publishing such as blogs can be useful but at the same time they aren't peer reviewed so you have to take what they say with a pinch of salt. I am not sure everyone is ready to switch over to social media.

Alex Davenport's blog: Starting out in Science <http://begsci.wordpress.com>

Elena Golovuskina

I am currently a PhD candidate at Glasgow Caledonian University. The topic of my PhD is developing employability skills of doctoral researchers. I completed my BSc in Linguistics in my home country Russia then completed my MSc and I have just completed my first year of my PhD.



I prefer to discover information about my work by using social media, discussing with my colleagues and online resources. It depends on my needs and what I want to find out but I usually get a lot of information through Twitter.

I prefer to use blogging, microblogging like Twitter, social bookmarking, social citation like Zotero, writing tools, social/professional networking tools like Facebook and LinkedIn and aggregators and dashboards like Netvibes. I think that all of them are integral in my everyday and professional life but for different reasons.

I first started using social media tools because my supervisor encouraged me to do it because it would be really useful for my research. I actually believe that social media have helped me becoming a better researcher because I learnt to organise myself in a better way, disseminate it more and connect with other researchers.

Social media have impacted on my personal life in a very bad way. It just takes a lot of time and you get addicted to it so I find myself now spending more time on Twitter, LinkedIn etc instead of doing more research or spending time with people in real life.

In general, I think social media is a good thing, if you balance it all up. It's a great resource for researchers in terms of public engagement, getting new contacts and employability. It is also very important to establish a digital profile nowadays so that people can find out easily about you and your research.

Elena Golovuskina's blog: My exciting PhD journey! <http://elenaphd.wordpress.com>

Pat Heslop

I am currently working as a Professor of Molecular Cytogenetics and Cell biology at the University of Leicester. My interests include genetic diversity, crop plant evolution and breeding, genomics and functional genomics, systems biology and interactions between genes etc



When publishing my work I prefer to use more traditional ways like publishing in journals and presenting in conferences, but also talking to people for original stuff.

I usually use social media in my professional and personal life. Specifically, I use blogging, micro blogging, social citation, social/professional networking tools and aggregators and dashboards like Netvibes and iGoogle.

All of the social media tools I use are very useful and important in my life and research all for different reasons. I don't specifically use on or rely on any because they might start changing or go bust or have other difficult changes.

Chris Jobling

I am a University lecturer at the University of Swansea. My original area of research was computer-aided Control Systems Design. That is the development of tools for control systems designers to use. From that I became interested in software engineering in general and internet technology in particular. My main interest these days is e-learning.



When I am trying to find something about my job I mainly use social media. Social media is becoming more important. In the past I used to discuss with my colleagues, more recently with e-learning but it's not my primary source of information. If I want to publish or disseminate my research I mostly do that via my blog or my University's e-learning community.

I tend to use blogging quite extensively, microblogging like Twitter, Friendfeed and Amplify, social bookmarking, writing tools and social/ professional networking tools like LinkedIn which I think has more potential. I am not sure that I really like Facebook so I don't look after my account there really.

My network is comprised of people I know, people I know from their blogs or online presence who I haven't met in person.

I think social media leak into my home life more than it should. I don't usually use social media much in my personal life. It's mostly work-or at least work related. That's why I find Facebook a bit irrelevant.

The major hurdles in the adoption of social media tools are the misconception that it's for children, trivial or about celebrities perhaps. There is a general belief that research can only be published in academic journals and discussed face-to-face at a conference. That's why traditional methods of counting and rating research contributions discourage the use of blogs.

Chris Jobling's Blog: Fresh and Crispy <http://blog.cpjobling.org>

Constantina Katsari

Currently I am a Lecturer in Ancient History at the University of Leicester. Throughout my career I basically followed the academic path. I worked in various countries like Greece, Ireland, Germany and the UK.



When I want to discover information about my work I usually use online resources, the library, museums and when my research is in an advanced stage I discuss with a colleague. When I want to publish or disseminate my research and ideas I use academic journals, books, conference presentations, academic.edu and my personal website/blog.

I tend to use blogging like Wordpress and Posterous, microblogging, social bookmarking, writing tools like Google Docs and social/ professional networking tools like Facebook. I don't believe any of these networking tools is important in my life in general however, my blog and Facebook are very important to my professional life and research.

The reason that made me use social media tools initially was because I needed to advertise my discipline and my work more widely.

The thing that discouraged me from using social media in the first place were the rumours that my exposure will have negative effects. The rumours were not entirely unfounded, as I feel very vulnerable sometimes. I guess that always happens when you are on the spotlight.

The training I received for the use of social media was an online marketing course and I did a lot of personal research before I started using social media tools.

I don't believe that social media helped me become a better researcher, they have helped me though to popularise my work a little bit more.

I believe the major hurdle in the adoption of social tools is the lack of time. Also, the university does not recognise them and colleagues sometimes are causing troubles.

Constantina Katsari's blog: Love of History <http://constantinakatsari.wordpress.com>

Cameron Neylon

I work at STFC in the ISIS Neutron Scattering Facility where my job is focussed on encouraging a wider use of the neutron scattering by biological scientists. It's a mixture of public relations, user support, methods development, and specific research. Since moving here I've got more involved in online tools and other projects associated with managing data, working with the web, scholarly communications, advocacy, as well as the regular work stuff of supporting users, building systems and infrastructure for support, and developing methods.



I often get information about my job and research from online sources, blogs, twitter, comments, which might point me towards more traditional pieces that I should read. I do that because online data in my specific research area is sparse and badly managed so there isn't much there.

Social media is the single most important mechanism for me to explore ideas, have conversations, and suggest new ideas. Those conversations take place across Twitter, blogs, email groups, Friend feed, and some other services. It's quite diverse but you need to go where the community is that you want to communicate with and for me that is increasingly not a traditional academic research audience. But papers are what will determine if I get a promotion...

I first started using social media because I think I came from a place where it was clear to me that as researchers we needed to publish more effectively to support better development of theory around what were very empirical areas. So it was initially about effective data sharing. Then I got interested in the more general ideas of effective communication on the web and found there was a community already out there. I wanted both to be able to record my own ideas in this space in a way that was 'native' to it and to engage with that community so blogging was a natural course to take.

Probably to a certain extent social media have affected my work-life balance in a negative way. Being able to be always connected isn't always healthy. But equally I think it does help me to do some things more efficiently. To a certain extent as an academic researcher you're always going to be working at or beyond capacity, it goes with the territory.

Cameron Neylon's blog: Science in the Open <http://cameronneylon.net>

Alun Salt

I am currently working at the Student Development department in the University of Leicester and I also give lectures on various MS Office products. I am also attached to the Centre for Interdisciplinary Science and I work for the Annals of Botany on their social media site.



I prefer to discover information regarding my job by using social media like Twitter and to a lesser extend Facebook and in face-to-face talks with people from the University of Leicester. Regarding research it tends to be through skimming the journals and talking with people through email. Ancient History/ Archaeology is still strong on email lists and isn't yet happy about the ideas of weblogs.

The reasons that made me start using social media are because it allowed me to make connections with people I couldn't realistically do physically. It's not practical where I live to go down to London for an hour's seminar at 4pm

I don't think social media made me a better researcher. If I were in a field where there were plenty of researchers then network effects might happen but in my case its closer to thinking of social media as transport. It gets you where the information is, but it doesn't change what you do with it. Being relatively isolated, without social media connexions I simply wouldn't have been able to be in a research community like someone campus based.

I think researchers will start using social media more, but I don't think it will be a central feature of anyone's life. We use word processors. They massively enhance the ability to write, and because files are re-writable we edit so much more for ourselves than we used to. How many times do you sit and write, re-write and re-re-write a sentence? Yet I can't recall many disciplines seriously thinking about the 'word processor revolution' in their fields. One of the things that is a bit odd about social media isn't so much the social effects, but that people are also talking about it. I think that shows recognition of the social element of research, which isn't very obvious in a solitary activity like writing on a computer.

Alun Salt's blog: alunsalt.com <http://alunsalt.com>

Ruth Filery Travis

I am an AHRC-funded PhD student. I undertook an MSc at University College London in the Technology and Analysis of Archaeological materials. After that I worked for a while for English Heritage.

At this early stage in my career my primary method of dissemination is through my blog, along with rarer opportunities to present at conferences or give posters. I am attempting to get a paper published in an academic journal, but the really long lead-in time from first draft to publication is very off-putting as is the completely opaque process and the complete lack of any actually useful guidelines. I think traditional academic journals are really difficult to access for the first time because they tend to come across as more of 'who you know' than 'what you know'.

I typically use Wordpress Blog, Twitter specifically for academic/professional position, Delicious (but not particularly), Zotero for citation (though I refuse to pay for all the storage I would need to properly share my citations), Friendfeed (only for specific actions/conferences etc) and Academia. I also use Facebook but mostly for social reasons.

The one thing which is more important my professional life is my blog, because it is the most constructive and it gets good traffic because of the resources I post. I feel it is good because it gives enquirers a good idea of who I am, allows me to publicise myself in a way I control, and I enjoy being able to help others.

The one thing that discouraged me from using social media is that it is time wasting! I think most of them are largely pointless

I feel that the major hurdles to the adoption of social tools are actually traditional 'gatekeepers' (journal editors, interview panels) who don't think that they are good for anything. We'd all use them more if the people who control our career profession understood them

Ruth Filery-Travis' blog: Finds and Features <http://findsandfeatures.wordpress.com>

Terry Wassall

I am a lecturer of Sociology at Leeds University. I completed my PhD in 1990 and I have been teaching at Leeds University ever since apart from two years where I was at Sheffield University.



These days I prefer to get information about my work and research using social media, twitter, blogs, Google, but also working with colleagues, seminars, conferences and the traditional methods. Mainly I get information online. I make extensive use of online journals and key websites for discipline specific material for writing and curriculum development. Social networking I use for information on learning and teaching issues.

I started using social media for academic purposes and forming a network beyond the University. But I had also been interested for some time in how academics and researchers might communicate better with public audiences beyond the normal specialist and conference circuits, peer reviewed journals and so on. This has always been a political issue for me

I wasn't actively discouraged from using social media but there was very little interest amongst colleagues and the University teaching and learning community. By the early 2000s some were reluctantly using the VLE but even now there's no real interest. None of my current colleagues go beyond using the VLE in a basic way as far as I know. Some still don't know what a blog is or why they should want one!

I think social media made me a better researcher because I find stuff out a lot quicker. I now have a network of individuals who I respect and am confident in their work. The network discovers and filters and discusses. I have connected my research to the real world in a way that would not have been so easy before and maybe not have been possible. For curriculum development and teaching this has connected me with real issues that interest and engage students and has helped them become student researchers in their own right with a broader and more critical take on issues.

Social media in many respects have made my work-life balance worse and I have to be careful. But my work and non-work interests overlap to such an extent the work-life balance thing is hard to disaggregate.