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Key Issue - How to share and discuss your research successfully online

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Key Issue

How to share and discuss your research successfully online

Introduction

When I first started working in the field of online dissemination of academic research, about four years ago, I asked a lot of questions around why it is important to share your work online. Over the years, my questions have now shifted away from 'Is this an important thing to do?' (Yes, it is), to 'How can we do this important activity well?'

As I work with researchers at the University of Huddersfield across all disciplines, one of the first things I learnt was that the success of online dissemination and promotion requires different tools, methods and approaches depending on the subject area covered and the aims of the researcher. That said, there are certain central tenets that, if applied in a tailored way to your online activities, will help you to expand and engage your networks more successfully. I am going to cover five of these, and apply them broadly across a range of online platforms that you might be considering using.



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Targeting an audience for your research

When sharing your work online, casting your net as wide as possible is not necessarily the way to go. It is likely you have in mind certain groups of people or organizations that you would like to share your work with, so you need to know where these people hang out. What spaces are they using for their discussions? Where do they spend their time? Finding the right platform for your work is key to succeeding in targeted dissemination.

If you want to collaborate with other researchers in your field, Twitter¹ is a likely place to start, as it is the perfect platform for expanding your network and engaging in discussions around shared topics. If you are looking to connect with industry partners or focus on your career development, you might want to consider LinkedIn², as many private and public organizations have groups that you can request to join and then engage with. If your focus is more on finding new research and receiving feedback on your publications, then a platform such as ResearchGate³ or Academia.edu⁴ would be useful, as they combine making connections with the ability to upload your research and search for publications.

It is most likely that you will want to focus on several of these areas, so it is important to choose carefully and make sure you are maximizing your results for the time you are putting in. Personally, I focus on Twitter for my everyday conversations, have a profile on Academia.edu and ResearchGate to showcase research, and then keep my LinkedIn profile up to date for career development opportunities. It is about making the right choice for you, and ensuring that the tools and platforms you engage with are tailored for both your aims and the networks you want to connect with.

"Finding the right platform for your work is key to succeeding in targeted dissemination."

"... make sure you are maximizing your results for the time you are putting in."

Relating your work to your chosen audience

When sharing your work online and engaging in discussions, it is important to try and relate to your network. If you are hoping to broaden your readership and succeed in getting people from other subject areas, locations and interest groups to engage with your research, it

93 helps to find common ground or themes that they can latch on to. People generally respond positively to anecdotes and storytelling⁵, so you could use this narrative approach to explain your research. An ideal platform for this is a blog⁶, where you can tell your research stories and then share them with your networks on other social media platforms.

Melissa Terra⁷ did just this back in 2011, and found that her networks expanded, the level of engagement with her online activity soared, and the number of people actually reading her research papers rose significantly.

“... it helps to find common ground or themes ...”

If you have a story connected to your research that has potential for wider public interest, you might want to look at national or international outlets as well. UK Universities often feature in publications such as *The Guardian*'s 'Research in brief'⁸ with short snippets about their research and how it relates to wider society.

Getting involved in online discussions

Once you have chosen your platforms and started sharing your work, you will quickly find that the best way to make connections and receive feedback on your work is to engage with people and get actively involved in their conversations. With Twitter, you can use hashtags⁹ to join in wider conversations around events, conferences, research topics and breaking news. It is a great way to get involved in the behind-the-scenes discussions at conferences, or to follow the action going on around an event that you are unable to attend in person.

If you are on ResearchGate or Academia.edu, you can use their handy keyword search to find researchers who are working on topics you would like to know more about and then post feedback, comments or questions to start a discussion around their work.

Your research and open access (OA)

Making your work open access (OA) can make a huge difference to the number and demographics of your readers, and makes it easier for people to discuss your work online. By removing the publisher paywall that many people encounter, you are making that work available to a much wider audience who could potentially get involved in your conversations. You can of course choose to simply publish with an OA publication¹⁰ to achieve this, or, if you decide to publish with a subscription only publication, you can usually still make the accepted version of your article (the one before the publisher carries out their formatting, editing and typesetting) OA through your university repository.

I always make sure to e-mail my publisher and check with them first to make sure this does not break the copyright agreement, then once you have this go-ahead you can upload your work to the repository and link to it through your chosen online platforms.

Measuring the success of your online activity

As mentioned earlier, it is important to target and tailor your online dissemination activity to make sure you are getting the most out of your time. The last thing you want to do is throw your work out there blindly and then just hope that somebody comes across it. The best way to ensure this is to measure the success of your activities and continue/drop them accordingly.

“... engage with people and get actively involved in their conversations.”

There is a wide range of social media management tools out there to help you monitor your interactions, from follower counters¹¹ to publishing feeds¹² and interaction level reporters¹³. Whilst you might enjoy researching these and finding one that works for you, it might be that you want something that can cover all the bases without too much time investment. Altmetric¹⁴ provides a clever browser bookmarklet¹⁵ that allows you, at the click of a button, to view all the social media activity that has taken place around a particular article.

Kudos¹⁶, currently in alpha, cleverly combines metric analysis with content editing. This free to use service will allow you to edit the metadata of your article, making it easier for potential readers to find, as well as giving you the opportunity to add additional data

94 including presentations, videos and data sets that are related to your published article. Kudos will also incorporate a selection of metrics allowing you to track the use of your articles including the Altmetric statistics mentioned above, as well as download/usage statistics from the publisher website.

By keeping an eye on the levels of interaction that your blog posts/tweets/discussions/papers get, you will start to see patterns around the interests your networks have, and how they like to receive and feed back on the information you are providing. This helps you to tailor your online activity accordingly, to make sure you are not only sharing your work with your connections, but also valuing their input.

“... you will open up doors to people who might not have otherwise discovered your work ...”

Concluding thoughts

Although the initial decision regarding which tools and platforms to use requires some investment of time and effort, ensuring they are tailored for you and your networks means that you can manage your online academic presence with ease, and monitor the success of your activities. By relating your work to your connections and engaging in conversations around shared topics and themes, you will open up doors to people who might not have otherwise discovered your work, as well as finding new research by academics both inside and outside your field.

Further information

If you have any questions, comments or would like further information on any of the topics/tools/platforms discussed in this article, please do get in touch with the author (contact details below).

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