Putting **OPEN SCIENCE** *into practice in economics*

The best strategies and investments for more transparency and visibility in economic research

**PART 2: Tips for science communication with Social Media**

Science communication in social media is becoming ever more important for researchers, especially for economists whose research findings often lead to political consequences and impact on societal action.

However, trusting merely to one's guts when posting will often not produce the desired effects. The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) has published a guide that takes academics through the process of planning for an effective online communication. We have condensed the key findings for you.
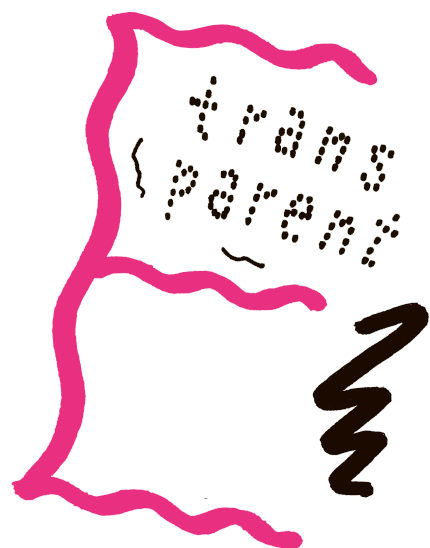
1 Preparation

Benefits

Social media offer a particular opportunity for researchers who want to engage the public with their work. There are lots of benefits, including:

Reach: They provide a platform to engage with a wider group of people than can be met with at face-to-face events. They also enable those who work at remote locations to connect with the public.

Immediacy: You can engage with social media wherever you have an internet connection.

Dialogue: You can open up conversations with others to better understand how they are making sense of your research, or to get input into your engagement ideas. It also enables audience-led discussion and debate – exposing you to other interests and ideas.

Community building: Social media can enable you to develop a community of interest around your research or connect you with communities who might be interested in your research.

Sharing: Talk about your research, interests, opinions, questions, events, jobs and other opportunities.

Improving research: Through collaboration and consultation, by listening to and learning from the views that others take of your research, and by hearing other points of view.

Gathering data: Both quantitative and qualitative data can be gathered through social media.

Raising awareness: Social media can help you with increasing your profile, networking, raising awareness of your research or project, socialising, and keeping in touch with others. They offer the opportunity for an interested public to find out about your research.

Challenges

There are things you need to think about before you start!

- Whilst the set-up costs can be small, the time investment can be large depending on your goals – so consider how you will build your social media activity into your existing routine.

- Posting on social media does not mean that you will access the groups you want to engage with – you will need to work hard to make connections, and get noticed.

- Not everyone will welcome your content, so make sure you have a strategy for dealing with any negative feedback or trolls.

That said, social media can be a truly effective part of your public engagement toolkit.

What *do you want to achieve with your science communication?*

If you want to work successfully with your toolkit, you need to answer the following questions:

• What purpose do I want to achieve with online communication?

• Who is the target group I want to address?

• Which platform does my target group use?

• What do I need to know about which channels?

• How much time do I want to spend on reaching my goal?

• How can I measure the communication effects successfully?

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What *do you want to achieve with your science communication??*

Social media can serve many different purposes. What do you want to achieve in your present situation?

Check appropriate answers or add your own individual response.

○ I want to inspire people with my work, build understanding and stimulate curiosity.

○ I want to find cooperation partners outside the academic world. I also want to identify societal requests, and I want to know which aspects of my research field interest society.

○ I want to collaborate in research with other scientists to find out what we can achieve together.

○ I want to learn from others and I want to be able to see the world through their eyes. I want to understand the values that guide other people.

○ I want to support people to make decisions in their lives. I want to influence their attitudes or their behaviour.

○ I want to be a presence in my community and foster my career.

○

Who is the intended audience of your science communication?
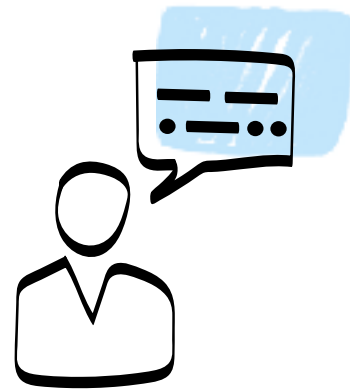
- Know your audience. Who are they? Think about their age/gender/location/interests and describe them:

- What can you find out about how your potential audiences use social media? Once you know you can develop your plan accordingly:

- Information on the demographics of people using specific social media platforms is available. Whilst much of this information is provided for those who work in marketing, it is still useful – so make use of the available information to choose an appropriate platform for your potential audience. Write down your thoughts:

- Consider where you can share your content to engage these audiences – you will need to go to them. Do not expect them to come to you. Note your plan:

Engage **your audience**

- Social media are a great place to share content. Make sure that your content is of high quality and shareable.

- Content should be succinct, easy to read, free from jargon, and stimulate curiosity and/or action.

- Consider what interests your audience. Why will they care about your research or project? Write down your ideas here:

- What do your audience value? How do they currently behave on social media? How can you link into their interests?

- Consider where people with shared interests are engaging and go to them. Note here your observations:

- Make sure you consider cultural, ethical and religious sensitivities when framing your content.

- Tell people at face-to-face events how they can connect with you online.

Your presence in the *social media*

- Consider who or what you are representing – yourself as an individual, your research group, your project, your institution or all of these! Keep in mind that you will represent all of these things in some way in your online engagement.

- Depending on your aims you need to decide if you wish to separate your 'personal' profiles from your professional ones. This can differ from network to network. It is better to decide how you want to organise this before setting up any accounts and to check the privacy settings on any existing profiles.

- Experiment and reflect. See what works with the audience you want to engage with.

- Link up to others, especially if there are other experts in your field already active on social media. Connect with the social media accounts of your institutional/grant funder. It is likely they will have a large audience and might be able to support you to grow yours.

- Be generous. Share good content relating to your aims, even if it isn't yours, but try to comment on it in interesting ways.

- Don't forget the social part of social media – it's about interaction with people. You need to be involved and be active regularly to be part of the community.

- Social media is unpredictable. Your plans might not turn out as you expect. Experiment with different approaches.
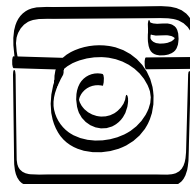
2 Choosing the *proper tools*

Your approach and platform will be shaped by your purpose and the people you are hoping to engage.
A few top tips for choosing the right platform:

- Create a new account for work-related posts and keep it separate from your personal accoun.

- Platforms surge and die; people using them shift. Keeping an eye on those changes means that you can adapt your tactics to ensure you're always working towards your aim.

- Here is an overview of the pros and cons of the various platforms: →**zbw.to/SciCom_tools**

Which content is shareable?

Format
Photos and videos (in particular) are always popular – visual elements increase appeal. Add captions to videos to increase engagement and aid accessibility. However, note that people don't always listen with the sound on. Videos should be short – seconds rather than minutes. However, this varies by platform.

Content
- Try to make your content **fun** and make sure it is **relevant**. Such posts are likely to be shared.

- People want to interact with people. Consider including posts that show your **human side** and that there is a person behind the post. The most successful brands on social media act like people.

- Make your post **clear** and **accessible** and develop your tone.

- Content must be **tailored** to the platform.

- Be **realistic** about your content. Is ist interesting? Why is social the right medium for it? Is it visual and shareable? Does it invite or provoke responses? Is it playful and / or related to the internet culture?

- **"Piggy back"** on other events that are topical, e.g. awareness campaigns, anniversaries, national days. Planning is key!

- Share content that people like to see. Be **creative**!

- Set up specific **opportunities** for people to **engage**, e.g. set questions to create conversations.

- Keep it **simple**, **unique** and **useful**. In the everyday flood of social media content you will need to stand out in terms of relevance and uniqueness.

- **Shareability.** Look at your content and analyse its shareability. Ask yourself: "If I saw this post on social media, would I want to share it with others?" If not, why not? Can it be reformatted?

- Don't simply repost other people's content. **Ask people** what they think about the important article or image. Make your audience aware that there's a human behind the screen.

- Remember to give people the opportunity to ask questions and engage in **conversation** by leaving that opportunity open. But beware of feeding trolls.

- Your content should include a "**hook**". This could be an interesting perspective, a question, provocation or theme. You are aiming to stimulate curiosity.

- **Exploit hashtags**. #hashtags can be a useful way to keep track of discussions/ debates/ interactions on social media (and may feed into the "paper trail" above). But: they need consistency (e.g. avoiding different spellings) and wide uptake to be representative.

- **Shorten your links** (e.g. bit.ly) to make them look more appealing. This makes the post easier to read as they are shorter and will take up less space.

- Targeted posts and **collaborations** with schools/ organisations are a very useful way to ensure that your posts have a wide reach.

- Don't be afraid to **experiment**. You're not going to stumble upon a winning formula straight away. Social media are ever evolving and you can be ever evolving along with them to find a way that allows you to engage with your audiences in the best way for both parties!

3 Evaluation and *impact*

First steps for your planning

1. Make sure you have a clear purpose, and set yourself goals to measure against.

2. Develop SMART objectives – things you think will help you achieve your purposes.

   Specific, *i.e. phrase your goals as precisely and specifically as possible*

   Measurable, *with qualitative and quantitative indicators*

   Attractive. *Plan your goals in ways that make you want to reach them.*

   Reasonable. *Plan your goals so that you can reach them within the time you set and with the resources available to you.*

   Time-bound: *What should be finished by when and how?*

3. Remember that evaluation should be ongoing, enabling you to improve what you do as well as assessing the impact of your work.

4. Remember to use both quantitative and qualitative data.

5. Consider your platform's limits for evaluation.

6. Be aware of actual reach vs potential reach – just because you have 100 Twitter followers doesn't mean they will engage with your tweet.

Data collection

1. Make use of digital tools for evaluating social media content, including those built into the platform.

2. Dig down into the metrics looking at reach vs engagement, demographics and conversations. Do long term analysis, i.e. weekly or monthly analyses to show how things shift.

Impact

1. Analyse the discussions that have emerged relating to your aims, using coding frameworks where possible.

2. Remember that engagement has an impact on you and your work – so capture this too.

3. Has your research process changed? Have your ideas of engagement been challenged or developed?

4. Check with networks to see if behaviours/ thoughts have changed.
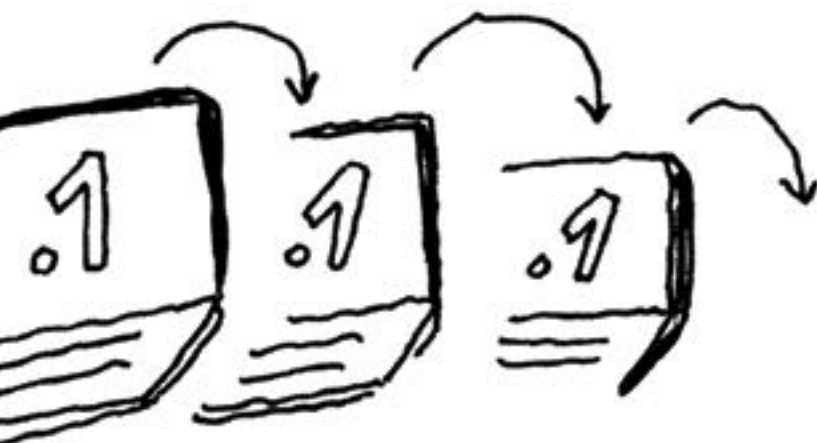
4 *Risks* and how to manage them

What are the possible risks?

Remember that using social media is not risk free – just like any engagement it needs to be thoughtful. Social media are a public conversation and have potentially international engagers. Risks include:

Content: Content can be sensitive to certain communities including international contexts. Be aware and get a second opinion. Don't be afraid to take risks but take **informed risks**. Own your mistakes. Don't forget to consider what you could be missing.

Reputational damage: If you are representing a project or organisation, make sure you understand their values and protocols. Beware of how you respond – think before you tweet! Engage with institutional communication/ social media teams for support and advice.

A focal point for the organisation: You may become a focal point for your organisation and have to deal with negative issues. Remember you can choose not to engage. Only share what you are comfortable sharing. Don't take responsibility for everything and involve the marketing and communications team at your organisation.

Peers undermine your engagement: Engagement is not always valued by your peers – but if the engagement work is serving its purpose, keep going. Take opportunities to share what you've done. Evaluate it and evidence its worth. Share this with senior managers. Work with your engagement team who can help support you.

Trolls: An internet "troll" is someone who posts offensive and controversial comments online in order to generate reactive responses from other users. Make sure you don't "feed the trolls". If you're not sure if someone is a troll, you could answer once, but then walk away. Make sure you ask for help and support. Recognise it as something trolls enjoy and try not to take it to heart. Report it to the social media platform if you think it violates their code of conduct.

Sustainability: Do you want the activity to be sustained? If not, what will you do if your project takes off in ways you did not expect? How much responsibility do you need to take to manage this?

Time drain: Be aware of this from the start. Make sure you factor time in.

Missing people: Be aware that social media do not reach everyone. Identify your current audience, then identify the non-users and those who only use social media intermittently.

Legal challenges: Check the legal definition of defamation and don't do it!

Privacy: Be clear about the protocols around what can be shared, e.g. event images in relation to GDPR.

Lack of engagement: Social media are an art form and it takes time to build a community. This depends on your purpose and the people you want to engage with. Review your approach as you go alongt.

Content hijacked by groups with different aims and values: Using hashtags can expand the reach of your posts, but can also increase the potential for your content to be misrepresented or co-opted by agendas you disagree with.

Difficulty explaining the content: If you find it difficult to convey context in tweets, consider finding another platform or provide links to more in-depth content that contextualises your tweet.

Changing landscape: The speed at which platforms change is very fast. Keeping up to date with the current best practice takes time and knowledge.

Training: Many institutions offer training for social media use. If yours doesn't, there are lots of guides and support networks online.

Differing agendas: Research institutions, charities, universities, businesses and other research partners can all have their own social media policies and guidelines. These can conflict with each other and it can be a challenge for individuals to find out where they stand and ensure that they abide by all the conditions they need to online.

These risks aren't here to put you off. However, they are worth keeping in mind, along with the other tips in this guide, to enable you to use social media effectively and thoughtfully to engage with your chosen audience. Good luck!

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Imprint

Funded by:

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