

Equipping PhD researchers for social media success

*Social media is increasingly recognised as an important feature of academic life and institutions are investing in training sessions to help doctoral students towards this. However, what this training consists of, and how sessions are best run is less clear. In this post, **Mark Carrigan** and **Ana Isabel Canhoto** share their experience of designing and delivering online social media training “bootcamps”. They highlight the advantages of regular, online sessions over the traditional model of a one-off face-to-face workshop in terms of inclusivity, learning and networking.*

What training should PhD students receive during their doctorate? It's increasingly recognised by funding councils that social media are a mainstream feature of academic life, a general professional competence as well as a gateway towards research impact. However, it wasn't so long ago that this level of acceptance would have seemed unfeasible. There was a widespread view that [social media would be a distraction](#), even a danger, for PhD researchers. It was treated with suspicion by many supervisors, in spite of the mounting evidence that what Pat Thomson described as the [feral pedagogy](#) facilitated by social media was playing an increasingly important role in the doctoral journey.

It feels as though the suspicion towards social media is coming to pass. In its place we have social media training offered by universities, research councils and learned societies which recognise these platforms are not going away and that researchers of the future need to be equipped to take advantage of the opportunities which they offer and prepared to negotiate the risks.



How to run social media training

This still leaves the question of the best way to organise such training. The default has been for it to take place face-to-face, usually compressed into a morning or afternoon session. Occasionally it will be a full day, though this carries the risk of being exhausting for participants and organisers alike. The full day format may also be inaccessible for part-time students, as well as those with caring responsibilities or health problems.

When we were awarded funding from the Techne AHRC doctoral consortium to develop social media training for doctoral researchers, the logistical challenge involved in gathering those involved together (participants, as well as ourselves who live in two cities away from the site where the training would take place) meant that this common one-day training session seemed like the only viable format. Though our respective experience of running comparable sessions had left us both uncertain that the model was effective, relying as it does on rushing people through a range of techniques and tools while providing them with little time to learn and explore on their own.

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Then came Covid-19. In common with other event organisers, it left us with two choices: indefinitely postponing the event until face-to-face meetings became viable, or moving it online. We chose the latter because of the uncertainty surrounding rescheduling, but also because of our curiosity about how the online environment could enable us to experiment with the format for this type of training.

One of the difficulties with a one-off event is that it provides little opportunities for sustained learning, and reduces participation to replicating something which has been demonstrated or to exploratory group exercises which are helpful but necessarily time-limited. This is a poor mechanism for learning social media because so much of what makes this difficult for academics is a matter of [practical reasoning](#) rather than technical capacity. Social media efficacy is a case of learning how to make decisions about which of these platforms are right for you as an individual (*discipline, career stage, personality* etc), and regarding their use (*when, how and why* to use them). For these reasons, we were excited about the possibility of staggering learning over a number of weekly sessions, with learning assignments in between.

Introducing: Social media bootcamp

What we called the bootcamp ran over four weekly sessions of 2 hours each, with a break in the middle. The sessions ran on Zoom, from early September to early October. There was a pedagogical component to each session: overview of the landscape of social media (week 1), creating and managing an online presence (week 2), developing an engagement strategy (week 3) and preparing for the darkside of social media (week 4). These were supplemented by extensive discussion sessions, either as a full group of 14-16 or in breakout rooms, focusing on our collective experiences of using social media platforms, as we made our way through the sessions. These discussions were anchored by the practical assignments which included finding the other bootcamp participants on at least one platform, tweeting a thread about one's research, and bringing an example of a problematic exchange to discuss in the next session. This format was deemed to be helpful by all participants, with one commenting that "The opportunity for synchronous and asynchronous, individual and collaborative reflection and engagement was helpful".

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Feedback collected at the end of the bootcamp showed a lot of enthusiasm for the format, with 78% of respondents stating that "Everything worked very well for me". Nobody felt that the online format, staggered over 4 weeks, had not worked. Comments noted that the two-hour slots were long enough for materials to be presented and discussions to take place, but not so long that participants might lose concentration. They also mentioned that the gap between sessions had enabled participants to apply what they had learned, and reflect on their experiences.

Various participants expressed their desire to attend more such workshops in the future. Some were particularly keen to learn more about intellectual property rights, and ethical implications of using social media platforms to collect data.

Based on our experience, we would like to encourage others to explore the use of online bootcamps to deliver training programmes for doctoral students. Not only did this format work better than face to face workshops, in terms of inclusivity and the learning experience, but it is also proving advantageous in terms of networking. The extended contact period time allowed participants to get to know each other better than if they had only been in the same room for a few hours, and many have continued to interact and support each other online, since the bootcamp. We believe that online bootcamps could play a key role in helping PhD researchers build professional connections when the informal networking of conferences and workshops is foreclosed.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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