

In 2021 let's do institutional academic social media better.

*Chances are you dutifully follow a number of poorly managed institutional academic social media accounts, producing infrequent, unengaging and perhaps occasionally important content. In this post, **Andy Tattersall**, provides advice on how to approach institutional academic social media in a more productive way and makes the case for its vital role in keeping academia connected in an increasingly digital university.*

Much of what 2020 threw at academia has been out of its control, yet one thing we can do professionally in 2021, is try to execute social media better. With most academics working across thousands of micro campuses (their homes) the connectivity offered by social media is more important than ever. It is very easy to just hope and pray that your hard work will gain the attention or publicity you think it deserves. However, in many cases without proper thought and planning it won't, and to quote Douglas Adams' Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy; it might as well be; "on display in the bottom of a locked filing cabinet stuck in a disused lavatory with a sign on the door saying 'Beware of the Leopard'."

Make your case

Social media is an invaluable medium to assist any individual or organisation communicate their research or services to a wider audience. That's not to say it does not come without problems, for instance, resistance from senior management who just don't get it, because they don't use it or have one case study – Donald Trump. To get them onside you need evidence as to why they should support not only the technology, but also your time in using it. There is still some reluctance by individuals to engage with the potential of social media on a professional level, as it's [not really seen as work](#). I'm sure the same might once have been said of email.

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Gathering evidence is essential, and one way to capture it is to speak to peers in other organisations and find out what did and *didn't* work for them. It can be very easy to 'cherry pick' the positive stories, but part of your own success with social media is also about discovering the failures. Social media success in a professional setting is ultimately about people and knowledge and connecting to the right people will not only improve your knowledge, but could give an edge to your organisation as you disseminate time sensitive information internally. Don't be afraid to approach high profile champions online for reflective feedback on how they use and benefit from social media. No one has all the right answers, but you are really looking to avoid the fatal errors and maximise the biggest of wins. Bringing in the voices of esteemed champions will also help if you are in the unfortunate position where your line manager pays little heed to members of their team, but will listen to someone at an equal or senior level. This is especially true if you work in an academic setting.

Give the task of running your social media updates to someone who cares

If you are in that senior role and looking for someone to run your; group, project, organisational, social media accounts and don't have funds to hire a specialist (often the case); then think carefully who does that for you. Don't ask someone to do the job of posting social media updates just because they are 1) junior 2) young (as young people use social media the best in your opinion) 3) because you don't think it's important and anyone can do it.



I have seen many examples where a person has been given the job of updating a social media account because of the aforementioned reasons. The best fit for the task is someone who can use social media, understands it and wants to use it professionally. This is especially relevant if they are someone who cares about their organisation and reputation (which leads onto the next point). Ideally someone who has been in your team for some time and understands the nuances of the organisation and how to leverage knowledge for its benefit.

Further, generic social media accounts for a team, group or organisation do not have to belong to a single person, if you have a few colleagues who want to engage, then create the right environment for them to do so. In some cases you may need a rota, or at least a style guide to help and ensure that they all have a similar level of ability and content. Encourage team members to support each other and nurture their skills under the wing of more skilled colleagues. Somebody may not know how to use social media, but if they know how to communicate professionally and effectively, they are more than halfway there.

Own your content

Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter still dominate the social media landscape and it is important that any presence on them is consistent. We are not just talking about images and style, but also ownership. A common problem for anyone starting a new professional social media profile is to tie the new account to their own email address. This of course opens up a whole can of worms, especially if they take leave to go on holiday, fall sick or leave the organisation. This can result in a scramble to try and recapture the account details to ensure it can still be used. There are various examples when a [disgruntled employee](#) can turn an organisation's social media account on itself and if they are the only one with access, then it becomes much harder to switch off.

Using a generic email address might not stop all problems, but it will head off many before they happen and can ensure a continuity of communication. For Facebook it is useful to have a generic account tied to a generic email address that owns any professional Facebook Pages. This means multiple, trusted users can access the page and post updates without using their own personal account which could be problematic, especially if they post from the wrong account. If you are part of a team using direct messages on Facebook or Twitter, then it is important to sign off messages with your name so everyone can see who is in the conversation.

Finally, there is no one size fits all to academic social media accounts. Depending on the use, there can be some freedom to loosen the formal and stuffy shackles of academic communications. Many large [corporate social media](#) accounts have increasingly moved towards a more light-hearted and casual approach to their communications, often directed by individuals and leading to increased engagement and publicity. This has proven to be a real success in many cases, but it's essential to remember that much research is of a sensitive topic and there is a fine line between humour and disrespect.

Maintain your Reputation

Reputation management has been increasingly overlooked as an important part of a social media communications plan on a micro level. On a personal and professional level it can be treated in the same way some people approach things like breakdown cover for their car or boiler. It's not the most appealing of issues and it's sometimes easier to stick your head in the sand and wait to see if anything bad happens. Invariably for most of the time, nothing will happen, but when it does you can guarantee it will be at the most inconvenient time.

'Reputation' often seems like something that takes place only in the upper echelons of the organisation, at the level of 'brand management'. However, social media levelled the playing ground, not just for the branches of an organisation to make use of it, but also for those outside to turn it against you. Since social media took off over a decade ago, it opened a floodgate for trolls and other threats to vocalise about your work and that of others. Whilst the threat level to most academics remains low, they are always there. In the same way the thorny issue of good information governance at a micro level has often been overlooked until recent times, the problem was always there, is changeable and remains ever present today.

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Therefore, it is important that those involved in social media communications (and all communications in the wider sense) are aware of what to do if things turn bad. Rather than reinvent the wheel, you should investigate what reputation management support already exists within your organisation and who provides this support. It's important to keep an eye on your social media feeds to ensure you become aware of any issues and have a plan ready for when they may come knocking. Conversations with appropriate colleagues can help triage whether a 'problem' is merely nothing, or a storm in a teacup. Having a simple guide on how to manage your reputation is not an onerous task, despite the fast-changing nature of social media, most of the core principles remain. Be polite, screen capture any issues, report to the appropriate person or organisation and respond in a timely manner if needed.

Much of the media focus on social media at present is being sucked up by events taking place in U.S. politics and global medicine. Whilst there is much to discuss academically in these spheres, seeing all social media as preoccupied with these issues misses the wood for the trees, or rather the numerous conversations about the whole spectrum of research taking place. By refining how you approach the medium it can bring about rewards that it has always promised (and does deliver) that include greater reach, collaborations and critical conversation

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science 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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