

Time, Finances, Confidence, Knowledge – Research communicators should be attentive to the resource inequalities inherent to academia

*Funding for research communication is a growing feature of grant applications and whilst digital scholarship may have started as an individual undertaking, it is now a mainstream and, in some instances, commercial activity. Commenting on how research communication represents a potentially widening field of inequality in academia, **Andy Tattersall**, suggests that research communicators should consider how their work contributes, or counteracts these trends.*

Research communication is rarely thought of as an inequality, due to its seeming simplicity and low barriers to entry. You can set up a Twitter account in minutes, a Tweet takes even less time. However, as anyone who has tried to communicate research findings to broader audiences will know the complexity can quickly escalate. Promoting research as part of a modern communications campaign may now include producing, videos, podcasts, infographics and other design elements all communicated through different social and traditional media channels. More often than not, this requires professional skills and training, which is where research communicators come in. However, these people and their resources are finite, which leads to the question how should they be distributed?

As Benjamin Franklin said: “There are three kinds of people: those that are immovable, those that are movable, and those who move”. Whilst we should champion those who ‘move’, we should also be wary of a potential [Matthew Effect](#), whereby those already effectively communicating their research accumulate further advantage over those who don’t. If we concede that there are some academics and research, that simply do not want to move, that leaves the possibility of reaching a significant group of researchers who don’t ‘move’ but are ‘movable’. In this regard, I suggest there are four factors that often limit engagement with research dissemination activities: Time, money, confidence and technical skills. Factors, which are of course interrelated and subject to wider inequalities in society and academia itself.

Lack of time

Academic life is [accelerating](#), increasing demands on researchers to win research funding, write papers, as well as navigate the choppy waters of information governance, research ethics and Open Access publishing, often leaves further research communication a distant prospect. This unequal distribution of time within the academy was starkly highlighted during the COVID-19 lockdown, which both increased the demand for digital media engagement and reduced the time available to academics with caring responsibilities and especially [women](#).

If you are a part time researcher with no funds or support to engage in research communications, then you are at a disadvantage. Especially so in comparison to a large research project with a communications budget that is able to pay for bespoke content and to develop [effective campaigns](#). You might choose to offset research communications to an in-house communications professional or private consultancy, but this brings us to the next inequality.

Lack of finances

Disseminating research costs money, especially for more complex outputs. As part of my own work, I have started to see an increasing number of successful research bids that factor in funds for dissemination activities. Whilst digital scholarship may once have had a vaguely indie garage start-up quality to it, it is now an established business. The increase in funding and recognition of these activities also points to a widening gap between those with the support to communicate their research and those without.

If funds are forthcoming, there is the issue of who undertakes the work, is it carried out in-house, by third-party consultants, PhD volunteers? There are pros and cons, to all options, bringing with them as they do different skills, levels of subject specific expertise and unequal expectations.



Lack of confidence

Academia is synonymous with imposter syndrome, something that is even more acute when an academic is thrust in front of a camera to comment on a research story. Whilst not every academic will be on 'the news', increasingly social media and research communication is becoming an audio-visual medium. There is a tendency for star performers to dominate this space, but if the thought of appearing in a video causes anxiety, researchers should not be forced into appearing in it, neither should they be excluded from creating one.

There are practical ways around this, asking other colleagues involved in the project to present the work citing your involvement. Video also does not have to include anyone at all, animations using tools like Videoscribe or Lumen5, are all possibilities. Perhaps of greater importance though, is building a research culture in which communication is valued rather than seen as a [waste of time](#). If a movable academic's first experiences of research communications are ad hoc or unfruitful, it can be a missed opportunity, especially if their research has the potential to be of interest to a wide or influential audience.

Lack of knowledge

For those researchers that move in terms of research communication, not knowing how to can be hard to understand. As I wrote for this [blog in 2017](#), the inertia that is brought on by the fear of ever changing technologies, can be negated somewhat by the support of in-house research technologists. This is a role that transcends so much of the modern academic landscape, from an understanding of Open Research, metrics, technology and media communications. Knowledge of dissemination practices is important, but so is knowing how to access this knowledge, which requires time, resources and the confidence to recognise its potential value.

How do we build equality in research communications?

Tackling these inequalities depends to an extent on how a range of longstanding issues within academia can be resolved. Research communicators are also constrained within their own institutional contexts. However, this does not mean they should simply be ignored. The introduction of increased funding for communications in research grants, is not without problems, but it highlights a progressive trend towards outreach and communication. There is no one size fits all and any solution requires investment from funders, support from line managers and expertise from research communication professionals. Research communication activities such as podcasting, blogging, and social media are not as onerous as they might seem with the right skills and support. That small band of academics who do move and have built up a good online reputation for themselves and their work started small. With the right support, others can participate in their own research communication activities and help direct their own research impact over time. Enabling this to happen for a more diverse range of research and researchers should be the goal for research communicators.

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