

Finding your niche in the four styles of research communication

*Research communication can often seem like a monolith, if you want to take your research beyond the walls of the university then do x-y-z. As **Andy Tattersall** describes, there are in fact many hands and styles of work that contribute to effective research communications. Outlining four styles of research communication he suggests knowing how to navigate these processes is essential to developing and experienced researchers.*

Let's get straight to the point. After a decade of experience using digital platforms for research communication, it has become apparent to me that there are four styles of research communication:

1. **Academic**
2. **Departmental**
3. **Institutional**
4. **Third Party**

Whilst for those in the know, this may seem obvious. As I have previously discussed, alongside increased support, funding and demands for research communication, [there are inherent inequalities](#) around both knowledge and access to different kinds of research communication. In my work, I see many academics who feel they should be communicating their research, but do not have a clue as to what any such activity should look like. I would argue that for those setting out on their research communication journey, or even those who are more experienced, there is benefit from a better understanding of these styles, the demands they impose, the support available and following this, the niche your research project fits into.

Academic led

Research dissemination at an individual level often starts with social media. This can mean Twitter, but ultimately, it should be the platform that links you to your intended audience. The barriers to entry are low and starting out can often be faltering, something I once likened to [ducklings taking to water or baby giraffes](#). I have also found this immediacy has two results: academics communicating their research without a plan and to an imagined 'non-specialist' or 'public' audience. Whilst social media like Twitter takes a minute to set up, it can take [months and years to master and build a meaningful audience](#). However, when used well social media can connect you to a wide spectrum of stakeholders ([peers, government departments, charities, even potential students](#)).

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The greatest benefit of this style is that no one knows your research as well as you do. It also affords the opportunity to develop transferable skills. Knowing where to publish a good research blogpost, or how to produce a podcast are (hopefully) considered useful. Especially, for Masters and PhD students building their career and reputation. It also offers an opportunity for academics to lead and inspire their colleagues in being more creative in their own communications. Whilst no academic is an island, it can often feel that way for researchers when trying to find the right support for their research. Being individually proactive with communications, or as part of a group can be beneficial, but invariably greater success requires support. That success depends on a variety of factors, not least what resources internally are at hand.

Departmental led research communications

At departmental level you begin to find more interests at play (notably student recruitment). On the upside, embedded departmental communication support should have a good understanding of the academics and subject matter they work directly with. This can help in getting the research shared, but more importantly it allows you to tap into existing relationships with academics in your field and prevents you having to painstakingly build your profile across different media.



I work within an academic department and actively try to give colleagues bespoke help or the practical skills to disseminate their research through a variety of media. These include a podcast and webinar series that I started in the Lockdown of 2020, a service that was especially valuable when normal communication channels, such as conferences and invited seminars were shut down. My colleagues work on high impact health research which has a very wide audience. However, it is rare for a department to have this model, where an individual is trusted to plan, create and share outputs. It's a model I explored on this blog with the idea of the [Research Technologist](#). Naturally, the success of these roles depends on the funds to licence creative packages and the space to pursue new kinds of projects.

Institutional led research communications

At the top of the pyramid of university comms are central communications and media teams operating at anything between institutional to faculty level. Depending on the organisational structure, much of their capacity may be taken up by student recruitment activities. In terms of central research communications there is also a cost-benefit analysis as to what out of a very large and eclectic set of research outputs they can and can't support. The relationship between central communications and the media should at least be established, so research outputs selected for coverage will have a better chance of reaching the right medium and audience for coverage. These teams will often also be points of access to institutional web pages and social media accounts.

However, most research is not newsworthy from a national media perspective and many central teams may have just one person representing a whole faculty or department. Adding those together means that only select research outputs will get picked up centrally. That being said, all research *is* newsworthy. At an institutional level it might feel like only professors might receive notable coverage and support. But, that does not mean they have a monopoly on the most interesting and impactful research. Some of the most newsworthy research is happening at the grassroots level of PhD students and early career researchers. The key is to let the right people in the media team know about it.

Third-party led research communications

The past decade has seen a significant increase in interest from external partners looking to support research communication. Research funders, publishers, NGOs and even commercial consultancies all have different interests in research communication. Working with external organisations and consultants can be very rewarding, although this is very much dependent with their alignment to your own goals.

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Research communication consultancies are a relatively new phenomenon and represent some of the key challenges in this area. Firstly, this style of communication is dependent on funding, some funders now actively support these activities, although as per usual, it is essential to plan ahead for these activities. Once funded, whilst it might be easy to defer to outside expertise (or sales pitches), it is essential to have an idea of what those activities will look like. If you are disseminating findings to those with hearing difficulties then creating a podcast is not a good idea. Unlike the other styles, you may have to invest time in explaining, sometimes complex outputs to non-experts which will require multiple revisions.

Research consultancies can also shade into predatory practices, where offers of large audiences, colourful online magazines, podcasts, or social media posts are made in exchange for exorbitant fees. My colleagues are regularly contacted by various small consultancies or individuals offering such services. Of course, not all are bad, but it goes back to my previous point about academics feeling that they need to be doing something to communicate their research, this reflex can easily translate into noise, rather than good research communication. This is especially true, when there is a pot of research money to dip into.

If you are approached by an external consultant, it is important to ask questions, is there a cost? How much? What can they offer? What kind of audience can they guarantee? Are there any hidden extras? Have they worked with any notable academics or organisations before? Much like when thinking about where to publish your research using your networks and the advice of peers can be immensely helpful when looking for a partner, who has the knowledge and expertise to communicate your work effectively.

Unifying the four styles

These four styles do not exist in isolation, but the more coverage you capture for your research the more likely they come together as one. Until that time comes you need to explore what resources you have to hand and who is best placed to help you. Making your research known to media and communication professionals internally is a good place to start. This needs to be ahead of publication and should be part of your research design. Timing is essential, especially for media work where publication elsewhere can effectively kill interest in the work, as most professionals are juggling multiple demands and they are also unlikely to drop things to focus on promoting your new research paper the day it comes out. Ultimately research communications are a long game. It can take time to build up any kind of visibility, particularly if you are just starting out on your career. The start of that communications journey may invariably mean doing much of this for yourself, but with tenacity and determination the attention will come as will those wishing to amplify your message.

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