

The use of social media in higher education can be a positive step towards bridging the digital divide, but it is not a fail-safe measure

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Social media can be a transformative tool in the dissemination of research writes [Dr Sarah-Louise Quinnell](#), yet the key to using these techniques is that we must ensure that through them we maximise impact and engagement rather than perpetuate or compound exclusion.



In my [previous post](#) I discussed how I had used social media applications in my research. One of the most common questions I was asked was whether, as I was looking at policy implementation across Africa, I felt my use of social media and digital research methods was inclusive. I was very aware that I would face this criticism at some point in my research process as I was working in areas without the same levels of technical service and infrastructure to support this technology, thus a number of those affected by the decisions made by policy-makers would not have the access to the technology I was using to collect data, or so I thought. In reality I found the use of digital / social technology extremely important for gaining an overview of the bigger picture as the majority of actors involved were dispersed across the globe and this was the best way for me to interact with them and enter their communities.

This is, however, something to be mindful of when engaging with new or social media applications in our research, particularly those of us working with developing country populations. Traditionally the 'digital divide' is defined as, according to Lesame, 'the gap between the access of individuals, households, organisations, countries and regions at different socioeconomic levels of ICTs and Internet usage' and again, in relation to the gap between developing and developed societies. It must, however, be pointed out that a digital divide exists not only in this context thus, when using these techniques we must ensure that we maximise impact and engagement rather than perpetuate or compound exclusion.

After reading [Carl Heggerty's blog](#) it made me think about two things, firstly, what 'Time Geography' can offer our understanding of social media access and participation but also what we as researchers should consider when applying these techniques in our work in order to ensure impact and engagement with a wider audience i.e. to open up rather than close down the space for people to participate in our research. The ESRC have developed guidance for using interactive media as part of their [impact tool kit](#) but questions still need to be asked.

Where are your respondents based?

Social or interactive media are said to have a global reach, but as I have already highlighted for reasons of access and infrastructure some areas are less able to interact than others. Does this matter? Well it depends. If you are only dealing with a small population or trying to understand a different perspective as I was it does not, but if you are trying to engage with a population that does not have the access then you may need to consider a different method. The same question needs to be asked in relation to disseminating your results.

Who are you disseminating to?

There is a perceived idea that using interactive media means that you can communicate your research to a wide range of users. This depends on how you pitch and promote your research. The ESRC highlight other researchers and the media but in using social media to engage with a wider audience researchers need to consider public engagement, engagement or non technical specialists, including those from overseas. If we use social media to disseminate to the same groups we have traditionally engaged with in the past we are

doing these new technologies a disservice and are continuing to exclude others. The ideas encapsulated in Heggerty's blog considering the use of 'time geography' theory to add to our understanding of how social media can enable public engagement but this only relates to enable access in terms of infrastructure we, as researchers, have to make our work accessible to the wider public not just our own peers. This requires a different type of writing and a different type of presentation / promotion.

Are you enabling dialogue?

Blogs, tweets, online surveys / polls allow you to have two-way information flows with your users. Some may agree, some may disagree with what you have to say, are you prepared to engage with those who give negative feedback? I initially found negativity difficult to deal with but now I have learnt to accept and integrate this into the research process. I keep both positive and negative comments on my site, unless they are those trying to sell me cheap Viagra.

Bridging the digital divide is more than a question of infrastructural access, it is also one of presentation, dialogue and perception. If we are going to bridge the divide we need to make our work accessible to all groups. Not everyone blogs, not everyone wants to bridge the divide but we have to make our work appealing and that is the challenge.

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4. [Social media is inherently a system of peer evaluation and is changing the way scholars disseminate their research, raising questions about the way we evaluate academic authority](#)
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