Five minutes with The Incidental Economist Austin Frakt: "Only 0.04% of published papers in health are reported on by the media, so blogs and other social media can help."

by Blog Admin November 11, 2011

*Health economist and editor of The Incidental Economist **Austin Frakt** takes five minutes to talk to LSE Impact blog editor **Danielle Moran** on how his research blog has increased his exposure and has grown to become a credible source in academic, media and policy circles.*

Why did you originally decide to blog, and how has your experience with The Incidental Economist changed or evolved your ideas on knowledge dissemination?

Originally, I was invited to blog on The Finance Buff, a personal finance site. I had interacted online with the creator of that blog and found we had a mutual interest in a certain style of investing and in explaining it to others.

Within a few months I realized that I didn't have enough to say about personal finance to sustain my interest or writing, but I still loved to write and educate. It was natural to turn to health economics and health policy, since I think about those every day, sometimes all day, sometimes half the night.

I've always been empirically minded. I'm not big on unverified or unverifiable theories and speculation. I'm not that interested in making arguments that serve a political interest. I'm really a scientist and an engineer. That was my academic training – physics and engineering – all the way through graduate school, though I work as a health economist.

Consistent with all this, I read a lot of empirically-oriented academic papers and other material produced by subject-matter experts and relevant to health policy. It has a lot more to say about the likely outcomes of various policy interventions than most people realize.

But it's not readily accessible to those it can best serve, policymakers. One way to reach policymakers is by translating the content of technical work for journalists. If journalists can understand and report on it, there is a prayer it might influence policy. As a community, health services researchers still have a long way to go in this regard. Only 0.04% (not a typo!) of published papers in health are reported on by the media. Blogs and other social media can help.

You initially ran TIE as a single-author blog. Now that the blog has transitioned to a multi-author platform, how do you find the process different, and what benefits, or problems, do you find a multi-author blog brings?

Initially, it was like an out-of-body experience to see content published from a platform that was once entirely my own. That's slightly more than a metaphor (ok, simile) because I do use the blog as a notebook for my thoughts. It really is an extension of the memory functions of my brain. Now it has multiple personalities. I'm still looking for the ICD code for that (multiple blog disorder?).

The benefits are that the platform is being leveraged to provide more great content than I could produce on my own. It's more efficient and productive to have good people fill up TIE than for each to try to draw attention to their own blog. My co-bloggers are excellent, and the blog is as much theirs as mine. I like to say that TIE has undergone several mergers, not acquisitions. I learn a lot from the others who blog at TIE

– Aaron Carroll, Don Taylor, Kevin Outterson, Harold Pollack, and Steve Pizer – and they are great resources.

The disadvantage is that the blog does not have a single, unified voice. I'm not talking about disagreements of perspectives among the bloggers. I'm just talking about the ability of readers to connect. Blogging is far more personal than academic or print journalistic writing. I think it is most successful when readers feel they know the writer as an individual, a bit like a columnist, perhaps. I think that's harder when there are multiple voices. Other blogs I read have gone to a multi-blogger format (e.g. Ezra Klein's). So, I can tell you from personal experience as a reader, it's a different experience than the single-blogger style.

You've previously written on the 'timing mismatch' that stands between traditional journal publishing and press releases and policy-making and 24-hour news. Is this something that blogging research and promoting academic work through social media are uniquely positioned to counter?

I don't know about uniquely positioned. It's not as if there were not other channels of timely dissemination before the internet. But blogging definitely helps. It takes very little time to put a post together, and it can reach the right audience at light speed. It's more efficient than a phone call since it is one to many. I suppose email is similar but the beauty of a blog is that readers self select. They're already receptive to your input. Sending an email to someone (or to many people) who doesn't (or don't) expect or want it is not as likely to penetrate.

For all these reasons, a blog is a useful way for subject-matter experts to disseminate worthy and relevant research at the time it is relevant to the policy debate, which is not the timing achieved by press releases. Press releases are timed somewhat randomly and, therefore, often are not relevant to the issue of the moment. I've illustrated (see chart) and discussed this on TIE so I refer interested readers to that.

To reach policy makers, researchers need to repackage policy-relevant research findings in a way that is fast, accessible, knowledgeable, relevant, credible, and personal. Click the chart to see more

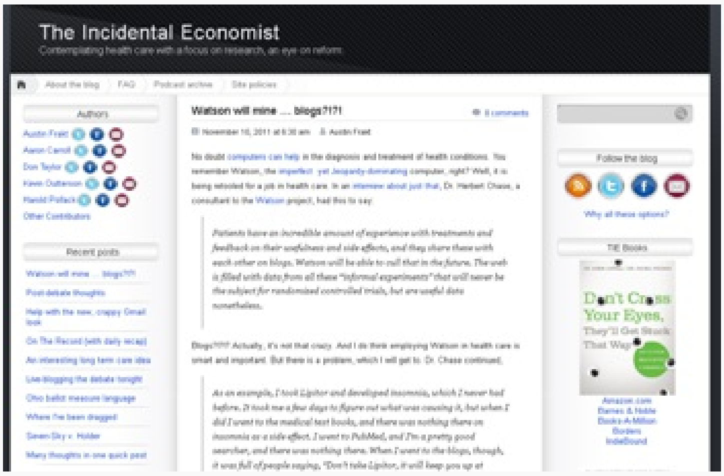
From your experience with TIE, how have you found that blogging has increased your exposure? And have your blogs produced any unexpected results?

Blogging has definitely increased my exposure, both within academia and the broader policy and media worlds. It's been net positive, so far, leading to greater access to colleagues at other institutions (who didn't know me at all before) and to the policy process.

The whole thing has been unexpected. None of this was planned or even my ambition when I began blogging. It just happened. I suppose TIE provides something of value, something unique and relevant. It is accepted as credible and accessible, a byproduct of who we are and how we think.

I'll be honest, though. Once I saw the potential for TIE to be of greater value and use to journalists and policy experts, I've directed my blogging in service to that. I also reach out to interested parties by email and on Twitter. So there is some behind-the-scenes promotion. Still, if it wasn't valuable, none of that would work. The quality of the product comes first, and it relies on the good work by my colleagues in research. They (and I) do the hard work, crunch the data, write the papers. Then the translation and dissemination can begin.

What would you say to academics who are skeptical about blogging their research or to those who are interested but worry about time or work pressures?



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I think one can use blogs and Twitter for productive dissemination without a big time commitment. Naturally, the more one does it, the more efficient one becomes. Also, one refines one's approach to achieve better results with the same effort. Still, if one wrote one good, policy relevant, research based post per week, that would be valuable. That could take as little as an hour or two. One can also tweet out relevant papers and facts or email them to potentially interested individuals (journalists, etc.). As I said, that may not be as efficient or useful, but it is still worth trying to reach out. Also, don't just promote your own work. Be an ambassador for the research community to which you belong. That's both more credible and more broadly useful.

But before all that, academics could start reading blogs and following Twitter feeds. Trust me, the best health-related policy news is in the blogosphere. It's been that way for years.

You can follow Austin on twitter @afrakt.

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