

Preventing rigour mortis: our migration to social media does not spell the end of academic rigour

by Blog Admin

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Academic research involving social media is still perceived as less rigorous than traditional journal publishing. [Alan Cann](#) argues that while peer review remains the gold standard for quality research, we must apply this standard to the new unit of publication – a blog or even a tweet, not look down on the digital methods entirely.



At the [From Research to Policy: Academic Impacts on Government meeting](#) in March, there was some discussion about what makes academic research distinctive from other sources. The panel discussion included what stage of the political cycle a government is more likely to be amenable to academic influence, which reminded me of the famous quote from [Andrew Lang](#), “He uses statistics as a drunken man uses lamp-posts – for support rather than illumination.” Leaving issues of policy versus politics aside, [Huw Davies](#) suggested that a distinctive characteristic of academic research is academic rigour.

What is academic rigour?

The unspoken connotation in the discussion was that academic research involving or disseminated via social media as a primary channel is often perceived as less rigorous than conventional publication. Clearly the capacity of a single 140 character tweet is much less than that of an academic monologue, but does that necessarily imply it is less rigorous? Social media is all about the conversation, offering possibilities for ongoing communication between the producers and consumers of research which are not, for the most part, available through conventional academic publication channels. As [Patrick Dunleavy suggested](#) at the meeting, a Republic of Blogs is emerging equivalent to the [Republic of Letters](#) in the 17th Century. And by blogging, academics have a much deeper shop window to display their wares.

It remains a common misconception that open access journals are not peer reviewed. Many, if not most, are, and my own recent experiments with open peer review, where I have [subjected academic writing to transparent peer review via my blog](#), confirms that new publication channels through social media offer opportunities to correct some of the problems which have built up around peer review through conventional journals. These include unacceptably long publication delays of many months or even years in some cases, and questions about the reliability of integrity of a process conducted in secret without any public scrutiny. For all the faults of conventional publication channels peer review rightly remains the unassailable gold standard for academic rigour. But that does not mean that peer review can only, or should always, be conducted in the manner that it traditionally has been.

David Weinberger has been pre-eminent in pointing out that digital information is fundamentally different to its analogue precursors. By extension, digital publication also requires distinctive practices from the dead tree system. Fundamental to this is the notion of the Internet comprising [small pieces loosely joined](#), which raise the question of what the basic unit of digital publication should be. A single tweet is an extreme example of a minimal publication unit. And while particularly notable tweets (the ones where you set out your professional thoughts rather than describing what you ate for breakfast) may be of great academic value, it is not feasible to subject each of the 250 million tweets sent each day to formal peer review. But the current opportunity lies between a single tweet and a conventional academic journal paper. Sites such as [Figshare](#) have broken down the unit of publication into discrete units such as figures, datasets, tables or videos rather than the aggregation of data bundled up in traditional papers. And by including social features, these data atoms become eminently and almost frictionlessly peer reviewable.

Perhaps the most obvious new unit of publication is the blog post. One can easily imagine the young

Watson and Crick dashing off their thoughts about the structure of DNA on their blog to establish publication priority rather than risking the slings and arrows of the uncertainties inherent in sending their paper to a journal. Blog posts are the most obvious example of post-publication peer review in action. The rest of social media serves to enhance the discoverability of ideas, ensuring academic scrutiny and discussion ensues. Much of Darwin's anguish would have abated if only he had chosen to frame his ideas publicly and step by step because that was the accepted academic route to the development of knowledge.

As we argued in our report [Social media: A guide for researchers](#), social media applies to all phases of the research cycle, not just to dissemination. New media require new styles to achieve clarity (and brevity) without sacrificing academic rigour. Of course, you can go too far the other way ([The Economist, 2007](#)). So let's apply our old academic rigour to new media, but not so much that we achieve rigour mortis.

Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

Related posts:

1. [Altmetrics, a guide to Twitter for academics, and increasing your academic footprint: our round-up of social media blogs in 2011](#)
2. [Continual publishing across journals, blogs and social media maximises impact by increasing the size of the 'academic footprint'](#).
3. [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."](#)
4. [By leveraging social media for impact, academics can create broader support for our intellectual work and profession.](#)
5. [As scholars undertake a great migration to online publishing, altmetrics stands to provide an academic measurement of twitter and other online activity](#)