

Improved integration of communications and scholarly roles can help academics become successful digital influencers

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*It has become increasingly incumbent upon higher education institutions to improve the visibility of their academic research. **Heather Crookes** has examined the role of university departments in transitioning academic researchers into digital influencers able to engage with non-academic publics. Although the value and opportunities presented by this are clear, some obstacles remain. It is improved integration of communications and scholarly roles that will lead to increased digital scholarship.*



“We have a responsibility to talk about our work”. This was music to the ears of a communications professional tasked with increasing visibility of an academic department’s research. But how should we go about it?

Researchers are encouraged to articulate their work beyond the journal paywalls and engage publics on their findings. The rise of collaborative reporting from [The Conversation](#), blogging, and social media make this easier than ever, but with these opportunities come risks and inherent nervousness – both at individual and institutional level.

Forming part of a [CIPR](#) Diploma, I investigated the role of Russell Group university departments in transitioning academic researchers into digital influencers – interviewing academic colleagues who are active online formed a major part of the research. I found that, as thought-leaders, those who learn to speak to a larger audience using digital tools are more likely to enjoy numerous benefits. My interviewees reported that using Twitter to showcase their research led to the development of international networks, sharing of knowledge and resources and even improved outputs, as feedback, relevant reading material and even corrections from peers were able to be incorporated. To really make the most of free and easy-to-use online tools, the best approach for academics is to maintain a linked Twitter feed and blog – by only using microblogging and being confined to 140 characters, scholars are limiting their potential audience and message so a stand-alone platform from which to write and point users to would increase engagement. Other exciting digital routes to explore include [Reddit](#), [podcasts](#), virtual reality, and live streaming (if you have something to show).



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Being visible to non-academic publics provided one of my interviewees with endless opportunities for public and cultural engagement. While this has provided excellent exposure for the research, it is unlikely to contribute to his academic career. This unveils a fundamental issue at institutional level: digital influence is rarely considered in the promotions round. [A recent report](#) makes recommendations around integrating ‘public communication’ into procedures. This isn’t a new dialogue – there have previously been [calls to move away from judging success on being published in highly-ranked academic journals](#) and towards assessment criteria that value research with more tangible impact on policy and contribution to public debate. This shift was neatly summed up by one of my interviewees: “we have to consider profile beyond papers”.

Most universities employ communicators like me. We can help to bring research into the public domain. Working in collaboration with academics is inspiring, rewarding, and gratifying – so why isn’t it happening all the time? It is the responsibility of communicators to build trust and understanding between the two professions; by using the digital tools effectively ourselves, we can become digital influencers in our own right. My research demonstrated that improved integration of communication and scholarly roles will lead to increased digital scholarship.

I read [a recent article from The Guardian](#) with interest; the comments section and subsequent [#seriousacademic](#) hashtag were quite something too. It’s important to be clear here: there’s a distinction between “parading yourself on social media” and connecting with interested parties – especially those beyond academia – when discussing your research. Mark Carrigan’s excellent book, [Social Media for Academics](#) (currently doing the rounds in my department), makes a fair and compelling case for integrating digital scholarship into your day-to-day activities.

My reading for this project suggested that snobbery and the idea of being labelled a ‘self-publicist’ was discouraging academics from using social media or blogging to communicate their research. However, this was not identified in any of my interviews – an encouraging sign indicating a possible shift away from this sentiment. Interviews also identified a recent development; termed the ‘Brexit effect’ by a colleague. Political events have given academics more motivation to ‘use their voices’, ‘be ambassadors for academia’ and ‘get out of our boxes and explode myths’; a renewed sense of responsibility. Yet June’s referendum highlighted an anti-expert dialogue in the UK. Digital won’t break through this entirely, but if it serves to make important research more accessible, we must utilise it as much

as possible.

Ownership was another common theme. [Unlike their American counterparts](#), UK universities don't seem to be subjecting academic users of social media/blogging to terms and conditions or censorship. This is pleasing, but remains something communicators should have in mind when advising academic colleagues; the research belongs to them and interviews for this project demonstrate that they wish to maintain a level of control over messaging.

Interviewees were keen to express that they engage in digital scholarship for themselves rather than the institution. Moreover, they want to take ownership of their transition to digital scholarship; something communicators should be aware of when helping to promote research. We should advise, encourage and enliven rather than dictate.

University departments have a faculty of potential influencers – many of whom have been hidden behind paywalls for too long. Appropriate support, incentives and freedom could enable the institution to build corporate reputation, competitiveness in a tough marketplace and – importantly – give powerful publics such as policymakers and the media access to research findings that have the potential to make an enormous contribution to society and understanding.

The final report, [‘Exploring social media and blogging as a means of societal intervention: the role of Russell Group university departments in transitioning academic researchers into credible digital influencers’](#) has been made available online by the author.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the author

Heather Crookes is Communications Officer for Sheffield University Management School, University of Sheffield. She recently completed her CIPR Diploma. Her research focuses on research communication and digital scholarship.

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