

With academia moving in a digital direction, sustained investment in media training would benefit all.

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2015/01/28/digital-academia-sustained-investment-media-training/

1/28/2015

The dilemma facing many universities today is that distributed, external communication involves risk, but having a limited presence means the scholarly community is vulnerable to complete disregard. Any academic can learn the skills to communicate through social media and the traditional press. But it takes time, a concerted effort and media training. [Kevin Anselmo](#) encourages colleagues to take advantage of whatever media training their institution offers.



Many of us know that feeling of being in a foreign country and unable to speak the local language. It can be quite frustrating, as the messages we try to communicate are not understood. There are also risks involved as the inability to speak a country's local language can sometimes lead to unpleasant circumstances.

As someone who has worked in higher education communications for many years, I find this analogy rings true for many academics in terms of their external communications efforts. There are feelings of fear and uneasiness when it comes to interacting with journalists, writing content for their owned platforms or disseminating information and connecting with others using social media.

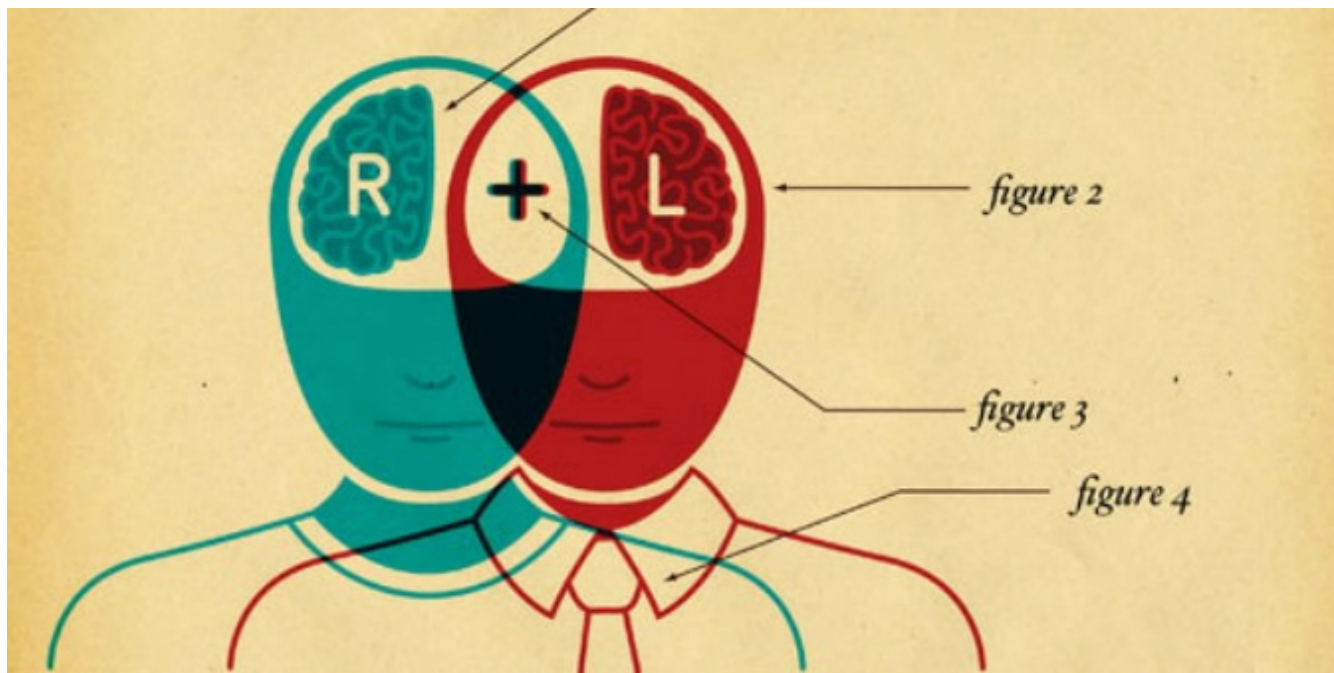
Here's a generalization about how a "media untrained" academic feels about external communications:

- Social media is a waste of time – how can years of research be distilled into a 140 character tweet? I don't want to be mis-understood.
- Journalists are just out to get me and they want to dumb down my research.
- I don't have time to write blog posts.

On the contrary, other academics comfortable with external communications will see the following about the same exact scenarios:

- With a social media plan, I can continually communicate different aspects of my research / areas of expertise, thus putting my knowledge to the service of society. I can also network on an ongoing basis, thus opening my career to new possibilities.
- Of course journalists don't want to hear the three-hour story of my research; they need to incorporate sound bites into their stories. Thus, I need to simplify my message, avoid speaking in jargon and demonstrate the newsworthiness of my ideas. This will make me a go to source for journalists, thus giving me – and my institution – ongoing brand visibility in different media outlets.
- While academic research remains the lifeblood for me as academic, the opportunity to communicate via a blog post – written in 1 hour and not over the course of 1 year – can help me build an audience and communicate with them regularly. Thus, I am well positioned to promote books, programs and my research.

The reality is that most academics are trained to speak to academic audiences, not public mainstream audiences, as part of their education. Hence more academics naturally have the mindset of the first person described.



Featured image credit: [OpenSource.com](https://www.opensource.com) (Flickr, CC BY-SA)

Just like most anyone can learn a foreign language if they put their mind to it, so too can any academic learn the skills to communicate through social media and the traditional press. But it takes time, a concerted effort and media training. Take advantage of whatever media training your institutions offers. If not adequate or not offered at your school, you may want to think about working with an external resource.

There are simply too many risks to take part in external communications without being properly trained. We have all heard stories of individuals whose digital footprints have been smeared because of something related to their external communications. At the same time, putting your head in the sand and not taking part in external media opportunities is also a risky proposition. You leave so many opportunities and benefits on the table. Academia is increasingly moving in a digital direction. Having no presence at all leaves you vulnerable.

In conjunction with any sort of training, consider applying these tips:

- **Study others.** There are many academics that are acing their external communications. Surely there are individuals either at your institution or within your discipline who seem to have a knack for getting media visibility, building up a following through their blog and leveraging the benefits of social media. Identify a handful of such individuals and carefully study their work. If they are interviewed in a prominent media outlet, check out their quotes. If they write an Op Ed, pay specific attention to the words they used to explain a perhaps complex topic in a rather simple way. See how they are networking with new individuals on social media. Then model some of the positives from these individuals and adapt it to fit your own unique style.
- **Have a strategy.** Many individuals get themselves in trouble with their external communications because they've failed to think through their strategy and big picture goals. Think about what benefits of external communications you would like to leverage. Are you looking to promote a new book, or position a new program or research initiative that you are a part of? Or maybe you want to build your thought leadership and get your ideas out there. Then ask yourself what success looks like (more book sales, greater interest in your program, or an increased number of research citations, etc). The strategy will be your map and you can refer to it as you think about opportunities to explore and messages to convey.

- **Practice and slowly get your feet wet.** You will never learn a foreign language if you only study verb conjugations. You need to open your mouth at some point and try speaking. Of course you would never say your first words in front of a massive audience. You would take incremental steps and build up your confidence. Likewise, as an academic wanting to communicate to external audiences, start out basic. Your training should provide you with the foundation and basic confidence to move forward. If you really don't have any experience and are completely uncomfortable with the process, then maybe raise your hand to take part in an interview with your university's different external mediums (alumni magazine, research blog, etc). You can ask the university communicator to provide feedback on your interview performance. If you've crossed that bridge, then maybe work your way up to doing some local media or a niche publication focused on your expertise. The same would apply for social media. You want to have down the basics, understand the risks and have some sort of strategy / big picture goals you want to achieve. Ultimately, you will need to get out there and actually start communicating.

While some will always be negative about travelling abroad, others will view this positively, knowing it can stretch them and create new opportunities. External communications for academics can be the same way. Don't go into this land unprepared, fumbling through the equivalent of your pocket dictionary as you communicate your ideas. Confidently "translating" your academic work into mainstream audience language can open your world to new horizons.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science 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

Kevin Anselmo is the Founder of [Experiential Communications](#) and creator of the [Media Training Course for Academics](#) course. Prior to starting his company, Kevin led PR initiatives for IMD, a business school in Switzerland, and Duke University's Fuqua School of Business. You can follow him on [Twitter](#).

- Copyright © The Author (or The Authors) - Unless otherwise stated, this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Unported 3.0 License.