Laying down the tracks for impactful research communications

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Despite my strong belief that communicating one's research is an essential stage throughout the research cycle, I know we are some way from that being universally accepted. I have always said that there would be no paradigm shift in how researchers and professionals moved from the old pre-Web 2.0 world to the one we find ourselves in now. Yes, there is lots more chatter and activity across the web and social media in the science and research spheres, but we have hardly reached critical mass. We also increasingly find ourselves in choppy waters on the web, whether that be the uncertainty around popular platforms like Twitter or the discourse between facts and alternative facts. There are a few reasons for that and hopefully this article will address part of this complex issue in some way.

Research communications on the surface can seem daunting, especially if you do not know where to start. Even before we get into the nitty gritty of sharing research we need to understand that certain things need to be in place. Firstly, an academic willing to communicate their research, some actual research worth sharing and some kind of support if said academic has never engaged in research dissemination activities. The support role also needs to have the right mixture of skills and passion (technical and communication alongside a desire to share research). Whilst there needs to be some understanding of what the research is about, as the communications activities run the risk of being an exercise in Chinese Whispers.

Consideration must be given as to things we know and things we don't know. For example, a researcher, their group or professional support will know such as the topic they want to communicate but perhaps not how to communicate it. They may also know their audience, whether that be fellow academics, charities, funders, members of the public, they just might not know where they exist online. They might have an idea of the content they want to communicate but not the actual mediums they want to use. Podcasts, social media, blogs, video, data visualisations, animations, infographics, all have their pros and cons. It is easy to get carried away by the idea that you want to use everything to maximise your research, but that is no small undertaking, especially starting from scratch.

If you are already sharing your research and feel that you have gone beyond entry level research communications, then my advice is to look for those little 1% improvements.

Communicating your research, like with any other process is a learning experience, especially given the changing media and web environment. Remember that the web, although static in appearance, is like a glacier, in that it is massive, continually moving and can always pose a threat. New opportunities are appearing all the time to use creative tools to help your message reach new audiences. It can feel a bit overwhelming trying to keep up to date with it all, so pick your platforms carefully and master a few, rather than be average at many. Unless communicating your research is your job, the chances are that you will have limited time and capacity to engage with such activities. Do not fall into the trap of spreading yourself too thin in the hope of getting a few extra likes and shares. Whilst it is paramount to remember that threats are also appearing from social media bots, a polarised media and issues around reputation management and information governance. Whatever happens, you will make mistakes, as always, the trick is to learn from them.

If you are starting out from scratch, you need two things, a network/audience and method of reaching them. The first requires some thought, as exciting it might seem building up a following of millions producing snazzy TikTok videos showing your latest stunt, reaching a serious audience to tell them about your serious research takes a different kind of focus and effort. Whilst some science communicators are able to go viral with their smart tech, high energy, interactive YouTube videos, you have to understand that big is not always better. Research communication is just not one single thing, in one scenario that could be a physics PhD student making effective, eye-catching, viral videos aimed at secondary school children. In another, it could be to relay the findings from a piece of work looking at a specific medical intervention that impacts a small section of society. Your audience might be quite niche, and for most research projects and outputs it probably is. It might be just a small group of fellow researchers, clinicians, patients, policy makers, interested citizens. Do not get hung up on the likes and shares tied to your communications, but that you reached the desired target and made an impact. Therefore, it is important not to get disheartened when your video fails to get thousands of plays, or your Tweet only gets a few likes. Communicating your research is a long game, built on momentum, you are building a reputation 2.0.

Building your network is key to this, and that is where tools like Twitter, LinkedIn, ResearchGate and even TikTok, Facebook and Instagram become important (depending on your research and audience). Think of these as your communications infrastructure, they are your train tracks where your message is carried. The messages, and how clear they are, depend on what kind of outputs you put on those tracks. As I said previously, the network needs to be connected and go to the right places. If you were building a rail network, you would not just throw down a few pieces of track across disparate parts of land with the hope that they will get people to the right locations. I have met plenty of researchers and professionals who just think the attention will flow towards them once they create a profile, it is not that straightforward. When building your network, consider carefully who you want to follow, as by following these accounts you alert them to the fact you are online and that

you exist, they may follow you back straight away or later on. Your network does not need to be vast, but instead focused and active. Your network is not only a dissemination tool, but also can be a useful, real-time knowledge engine. It can be an effective way of finding out what else is going on in your field, especially if you follow the right accounts. It might feel impolite to not follow someone back when they follow you on such as Twitter, but it is important not to inflate your social media timelines with updates you cannot relate to. I often get academics and students from across various disciplines follow me after I have hosted a workshop or seminar. As nice as that is, it is unlikely I will follow back unless they are talking about the topics that interest me and I often make that clear to them in the sessions. Regardless of how well you build your network you will have updates on your feed that will not be of interest to you. The key is to limit the amount of noise in your bandwidth.

It is important that your profile captures what your research or expertise is about. A common failing I see by academics and their research groups is to include no academic elements in their profile. I suspect to some extent a degree of shyness and imposter syndrome is at play here. Firstly, if you are creating outputs for an organisation, such as journal papers and reports, cite their Twitter handle in your bio and in the actual Tweets. This is especially important if you are a research group or project. Also add a link to that organisation or at least your staff profile page. If someone reads a social media update in relation to your work, it helps add credibility to your communications and shows where you are based at a glance of your profile. Next, add a profile image of yourself and not one of a pixelated, low-quality image that was taken ten years ago. Granted, not everyone likes to have their photos online, and nor should you be forced to, but do give this some consideration. This is so that visitors to your profile can put a name to a face and they are more likely to trust that you are a human rather than a computer bot, especially given the fast growth of AI-generated content. Finally, for Twitter users, carefully consider what Tweet you are going to pin to your profile. If you have written a new paper, are hosting a seminar or conference, or have written a blog piece, make sure you maximise their potential impact by pinning it to your profile. Most of these principles work regardless of whether you are on Twitter, ResearchGate, LinkedIn or Facebook. If anything, try to be consistent across your various platforms, whether that be Google Scholar or Twitter. Once you have put some of these foundations in place you can start to generate impact and maximise your research. There is a cacophony of noise on the web, not least the sheer amount of new academic papers published every day. Whether you are an academic or professional support staff, by building the right networks, using the right tools and making the right tweaks, you can start to help push your research under the noses of those who can benefit most from it.

You can find out more about improving your research marketing and communication skills by looking out for any announcements about UKeiG's upcoming half day Zoom [workshops and courses](#).