

Chapter 17

Driving impact online

A lot of researchers waste a great deal of time on social media. I'm not talking about sharing cat photos (though many of us find this an enjoyable way to waste time, of course). I'm talking about those of us who engage with social media professionally, but without any particular plan or goal. I'm going to suggest in this chapter that if you aren't working with the public and haven't identified any stakeholders in your research who are likely to engage with social media, then there's no point trying to use social media to generate research impact. It won't work.

Of course, there are many other great reasons for engaging with social media professionally: connecting and keeping up with colleagues around the world, for example, during and after conferences; managing to get in touch with inaccessible professors and politicians who don't reply to their emails; being first to hear about funding opportunities and the latest research in your field; the list goes on.

However, I know many academics who have invested incalculable hours writing a weekly blog that virtually no one reads, or who distract themselves with Twitter throughout the day without actually driving any new interest in their research (or getting much useful information). My hope is that by the end of this chapter, you will find out how you can use social media efficiently, so you don't have to spend much time away from your research, but get significant rewards for the time you do invest, because you invest your time on social media strategically.

Can social media deliver research impact?

You might be surprised how many of us use social media in some shape or form on a regular basis. The reason you might be surprised is that you are probably already using technologies that could be classified as social media without realising it. There are lots of complex academic definitions of social media, but I think you can boil them all down to this:

Public conversations that take place through digital media.

Using this definition means that YouTube is actually a form of social media, because you can reply to a video with a video of your own, and there are often long public conversations about the content of videos in the comments underneath. Blogs are a type of social media (when they work and people comment on them). Wikipedia can be considered a type of social media if you consider the number of people engaging with and editing the content of some entries. Figure 9 lists some of the other platforms that are currently available.

Typically, around 90% of the researchers I train from all career stages use social media in some way on a regular basis. However, the proportion of researchers actively using social media in their research is actually much lower. For the groups I train, the figure is usually between a quarter and half of participants.



Figure 9: Examples of social media platforms

Here are the top reasons cited by researchers I train who already use social media professionally:

1. You can use social media to get feedback on new research ideas, so that you can reframe them to be more relevant to the people who might use your findings.
2. You can get insights into the way that likely users of your research are talking about the topics you're working on — the kind of language they are using and the sorts of things they're most interested in. These sorts of insights can be invaluable when you need to start communicating your findings.
3. You can be the first to find out about news and events related to your research, and you can link your own work to what's happening, making it more likely that your work is picked up and debated.
4. An increasing number of researchers are finding out about funding on social media (particularly Twitter). You can also identify collaborators for grant proposals, who you already trust to be good team players through your online interactions with them. You can find out about funding that you might not have come across through your institution, especially linked to industry, which can help generate impacts from research.
5. You can take part in discussions around academic conferences using conference hashtags that are used to aggregate content relating to that particular event. You can stay in touch with academics you meet at conferences and elsewhere more easily, and have the opportunity to interact with leaders in your research field on different continents who you might not otherwise meet or be able to interact with.

Why don't more researchers use social media in their work?

Given all these benefits, why aren't more researchers using social media professionally? There are a number of good reasons for limited engagement:

- Time is the number one reason researchers tell me they don't use social media professionally. Most researchers struggle to read and reply to their emails let alone read and reply to the volume of material available on social media as part of their work day.
- Others have real concerns about online abuse. Official statistics show that women are more likely to be exposed to abuse on social media than men, but in my experience working with academics, those working on controversial topics are most

likely to suffer abuse, whether male or female. If you work in a challenging area, you have to grow a thick skin to talk about your work on social media. Many researchers rightly ask why they should have to grow a thick skin when they can choose not to engage.

- Privacy is an issue for many researchers, who object to the tacit exchange of personal data, which is then sold to advertisers as the price we pay for engaging with many social media platforms. Many researchers don't want to share their personal lives with their colleagues or the wider world, and others worry about their social media accounts being hacked, leading to identity theft and reputational damage.
- Others point out the space limitations of many social media platforms, which curtails the extent to which you can say anything meaningful in academic terms.
- Finally, there are valid concerns that using social media professionally could get people into trouble — ill-chosen words on social media have, after all, cost many people their jobs.

All of these are genuine concerns, and it is important to be aware of these issues before you consider whether or not you should be engaging with social media in your work. If you read this chapter and come to the conclusion that the risks are too high, and that you will not use social media in your research, then I will still have done my job. All I want is for researchers to take a serious look at the risks and benefits, and make an informed decision about whether or not to use these tools. What I'd like to avoid is people deciding not to engage out of fear or because they believe some of the greatest myths about social media for researchers.

The four greatest myths about social media for researchers

Most people who do not use social media in their research do so for good reasons. But I think many of the reasons people give for not engaging with these technologies are in fact myths. I believe that these are the four greatest myths about social media for researchers:

1. "Productive researchers don't have time to waste on social media"

To avoid wasting time, you need to be aware of the amount of time

you spend on social media, and what you are getting from that time. Do you actually have any idea how many minutes per day you currently spend on social media? How much of that time is spent during your work day, and how much benefit (versus distraction) do you get for your work? For me, the easiest way to understand whether or not social media is a help or a hindrance, and understand if I'm spending too long on it, is to regularly audit the time I spend on social media. In addition to giving you a wake-up call, the process of monitoring your time on social media for a week helps call your relationship with social media to consciousness, so you can think more clearly about how you interact with it. I only use social media on my smart phone, so I can use an app tracker to tell me how long I spend in each social media app per day. The alternative is to download a time-tracking app where you can manually set a clock when you start a task, and stop the clock when you switch to another task. These apps typically colour code different sorts of tasks for you so you can see how long you spend on social media, email and other tasks, and how little time you spend each day on some of the more important parts of your role. It is surprising how much easier it is to resist the temptation to check social media or email when you are holding yourself to account and know you will have to press 'stop' on your reading or writing task in order to 'start' more time on social media.

Rather than just limiting your time on social media, I'm going to suggest that you can go a step further. I have discovered that it is actually possible to save time and reduce the length of my working day through my use of social media. At the moment, I'm saving almost an hour per day, which I've chosen to re-invest in some better work-life balance (by taking out a subscription to Audible and buying a Kindle, and doing some recreational reading). This is how I do it...

Do you read or watch the news most days? If so, then you probably have a news-shaped space in your daily routine. The problem with the mass media that most of us consume, however, is that it is not very targeted. You have to wade through pages of newsprint or listen to or watch a whole broadcast to catch the few items that really interest you. I'm not saying that you should stop engaging with print and broadcast media, but what if you were to cut down the amount of time you spent on that, and filled that time back up again with highly specific news that's particularly relevant to you? Wouldn't this time be better spent? What if, during that news-shaped space in your schedule, you'd heard about the latest discoveries

in your field, found out about a grant you could apply for and kept abreast of policy developments or commentary relating to issues you are researching? Would that be time wasted or would that time actually make you more productive? I have found out about funding opportunities and found collaborators for grants (that I've subsequently won) through social media.

What about all that frivolous stuff you hear about on social media all the time? You don't want to watch any more cat videos. Fair enough. Me neither. The great thing about most social media platforms is that you can unfollow or mute the people who are boring you with endless pictures of their pets. I work on my signal- to-noise ratio all the time, unfollowing or muting people whose material isn't relevant enough to be worth my time. The result is a tailored news stream of highly relevant material whenever I've got time to look at it.

I have over 60,000 followers across my social media accounts. You would think I must spend hours on social media every day, but the reality is surprising. According to my latest audit (see the start of this section for my method), I currently spend about 35 minutes per day on social media (most of this time is spent managing two out of my four Twitter accounts and my LinkedIn account). Within this 35 minutes, I get all my news (I now don't use any other source of news media other than Twitter) and pursue pathways to impact for my projects. This is a net saving of 55 minutes per day, compared to the 90 minutes I used to spend on the news. Some of that time engaging with news used to be listening to the radio on car journeys or washing dishes. Now, I find starting or ending my work day with an audiobook much more relaxing and uplifting, and I feel like I have better work-life balance. If you are able to make a net saving in your day by getting your news via Twitter, you can of course choose to reinvest this in work-life balance, as I have, or in getting more done in your work day. The choice is yours.

If you're thinking that's easy for someone at my career stage but not achievable if you are an early career researcher, then take a look at Rosmarie Katrin Neumann (Twitter handle @RosmarieKatrin). She crowdfunded part of her first year as my PhD student, before she was awarded her scholarship at Newcastle University. Over her first four months on Twitter, she attracted 55 followers. Then she started using the techniques I describe in the following chapter. Within the next four months, she reached 1,000 followers, and two years later she had >10,000 followers (including many of the big names in her

field). This is not only important for her visibility as a researcher, but also for building networks as she is starting her own business as a knowledge broker alongside her PhD. She needs her ever-growing network to make people aware of the services she provides. She spends between 15 and 30 minutes per day on Twitter, including catching up on news and following/unfollowing people linked to her interests. Anyone can do this, and it doesn't have to displace other work.

I don't want this to come across as suggesting that our goal should always be to amass as many followers as possible. The focus, if we want to generate impact, should be on the quality of engagement you can derive from your use of social media. In many cases, a small but highly engaged and relevant following is far better for achieving this. However, for certain purposes, you may want to become influential on social media, and for that you need to be well known. I have different strategies for different projects. For my research project Twitter accounts, I'm focusing on providing balanced, up-to-date evidence to inform policy and practice. I tweet anywhere between once a week and once a month from these accounts, and don't have a strategy for growing my followers on them. However, for my knowledge exchange and impact research (@fasttrackimpact), I gave myself a target of reaching 10,000 followers before I launched my free online training course for researchers, because I wanted to have enough influence and visibility to be able to make the course widely available. It was an ambitious goal, given that it had taken me three years to amass 2,500 followers, and I only gave myself three months to reach 10,000. Two years later I have almost 50,000 followers on that account and it is the largest social media account in the world solely focused on research impact.

This social media strategy is just one strand of a much wider impact plan designed to get my research on impact used by as many researchers as possible. Social media enables me to achieve specific, measurable knowledge exchange milestones on my pathway to impact (like the follower targets I just described), but ultimately I measure the impact via longitudinal surveys with researchers, six months and a year after I have trained them. As I explain in Chapters 8 and 22, it is as important to track the success of your knowledge exchange as it is to track your impacts. How will you know if you are on track to achieve your impacts if you have no idea that your knowledge exchange activities aren't working? The nice thing about social media is that as a form of knowledge

exchange, it is very easy to track your progress.

2. “Social media will intrude on my personal life”

Okay, if you’ve got an addictive personality, this might not be a myth: proceed with caution. But assuming you can manage the temptation to check your social media networks at every opportunity, I think many people’s privacy concerns are very real, but entirely manageable.

First, you don’t have to put photos of your breakfast on social media — that choice is entirely yours. You don’t even have to post things — you can simply use social media to consume material. Second, you can set most social media platforms to only allow those you want to see your content. Even though I don’t have many friends on Facebook, and many are family members, I never post personal stuff, and I’ve got it set so that if others post personal stuff about me, I get to review it first before it appears on my timeline and the timelines of my friends. Third, you can choose to only use social media from your computer and if you do have it on your smart phone, you can choose to turn off the notifications so they don’t intrude on your personal life.

3. “No one would be interested in anything I’ve got to say anyway”

You don’t have to say anything. Most people start their use of social media as ‘watchers’ — they watch what other people are saying, and use social media purely as a form of news. Many people stay in that mode of engagement, which is still really useful. However, many people then graduate to liking, sharing, reposting or retweeting the things they find most useful (Figure 10). If you stop at this point, that’s also great. Now you’re not only benefiting from what other people are saying, you’re adding value to others like you who are following your updates. Many researchers engage with social media in these two modes for years before they post any of their own material. You don’t have to have anything interesting to say to benefit from engaging professionally with social media.

It is worth saying that when I give people the challenge of summarising their research area or a recent finding in 280 characters or less, there is very rarely anyone who can’t do it, and the things you learn about people’s work from what they’ve written can be fascinating. Being forced to be concise and simple in our

language can be difficult for many academics, but it is surprising how engaging you can be when you try. Even if you really can't find anything particularly interesting to say about your research, there is a very high probability that other researchers in your field will find it very interesting. Although that may not drive impact, it can still help you build your professional networks.



Figure 10: Most researchers start by watching posts by others, before signposting followers to useful material and eventually generating their own original content. Risks to your time and reputation increase from left to right.

4. "Social media will get me into trouble"

One academic told me that he had banned himself from social media because he couldn't trust himself not to say something he'd regret after a couple of glasses of wine on a Friday night. For most of us though, the chances of something going badly wrong are fairly remote if you exercise a bit of sensible caution. We've all heard about high-profile people losing their jobs over misjudged tweets, but part of the reason that they lose their jobs and we hear about it is because of their profile. You just have to look at the horrendous things that trolls say without consequence to realise that there is a lot of latitude in what people can get away with. However, as researchers, we don't want to be just getting away with it — we have our professional reputation to protect. So, my advice is to be super careful online and remember that everything you say is on the public record. You can say far more on a public stage than you can on social media, because of the way comments online can be taken out of context so easily.

For example, I once arrived late to speak at an event in Windsor Castle (after getting it mixed up with the Tower of London — oops!) and missed the bit where they said that the meeting was being held under Chatham House Rules (where you're not allowed to reveal the identity of those present). I subsequently got into trouble for tweeting a photo that showed who was attending the meeting. So yes, social media can get you into trouble, but for most of us, with a bit of care, getting into serious trouble is extremely unlikely.

The most dangerous thing you can do is to dive straight in at the deep end and start posting your own material on a platform you have just joined. You are quite likely to make a mistake, such as posting something private in public. Instead, start slowly and learn the culture of the platforms you are using before engaging in content generation (moving from the left to the right of the arrow in Figure 10). Risks to your time and reputation increase as you move from watcher to signposter to content generator. Even as a watcher, where you only read from the platform, there are risks. For example, it may be possible for someone to see who you are following, and to infer your political beliefs from the political affiliations of the accounts you follow, which may undermine your neutrality as a researcher advising policy. To mitigate this risk, I follow accounts from across the political spectrum from my personal account. Moving towards the middle of the arrow in Figure 10, people are much more likely to infer your opinions from the posts you like or share with others (no matter what you may write in your bio about retweets not being endorsements). Moving to the right of the arrow, when you start generating your own content, you run the risk of being quoted and taken out of context.

If you want to engage with social media without taking unnecessary risks, move slowly from the left to the right of Figure 10:

- **Watcher:** Start by signing up to a social media platform like Twitter or LinkedIn and just connecting with and reading from relevant people and accounts. If you choose who you follow carefully and manage your signal-to-noise ratio by unfollowing less relevant accounts, you can get immediate benefits for your research by efficiently staying on top of the latest developments and funding opportunities in your field. Engaging with social media as a 'watcher' can also prepare you for generating impact. Start connecting with high-level politicians, journalists and industry leaders who might be able to help you disseminate your research and achieve impacts. Many journalists have their mobile phone

number in their profile and many leaders will respond to private messages on social media directly despite the fact that you cannot reach them via letter or email. Start following people you think might benefit from your research and listen in to their public conversations and comment, so that you know the language they use and the issues that are resonating with them. When you do meet these people (or people like them) face-to-face, you are much more likely to be prepared for the difficult questions and be able to use language that will resonate.

- **Signposter:** The next step most researchers take is to start signposting people to useful resources online. It may be your latest paper, an article you read via social media that morning or something you're about to send to your PhD students or research group. Now, rather than just sending the email, you are repurposing your email and posting the link to the story or paper on social media. Typically people will just copy or paraphrase the title of the piece they are sharing, so these are not your words that can be taken out of context or used against you.
- **Content generator:** The final step that researchers take, typically (and advisably) after spending a significant time learning the ropes as a watcher and signposter, is to start actually posting their own content based on their research. This is the point at which most opportunities for generating impact occur, but if you're going to invest the time and energy in generating new content, make sure you've got a clear social media strategy so you know that you are using your time wisely.

Finally, it is important to emphasise that you get to decide for yourself if you want to engage in higher risk activities online that are more likely to generate impacts from your research. No one should make you feel left out or like you are a dinosaur because you have decided that you do not want to engage with social media. Weigh up the potential benefits and the risks, and then make a decision you feel happy with and stick to it with the confidence that you have made an informed decision.

How to make your digital footprint work for you

The key to making your digital footprint work is to understand why you have one. What do you want to get out of the time you invest in your online presence? Are you getting these things? If so, are these things worth the amount of time you have to spend online to get them? If not, how can you pull back from your online engagement

to stop wasting time? Some researchers have a digital footprint for one reason only: their employer demands it. If there is nothing else you want or need from the online world, then just make sure your institutional profile is up to date and you are contactable, and your job is done. For many researchers, their reason for being online is linked to their research only: access to better information more efficiently, opportunities to collaborate or get funding, and so on. For other researchers, online engagement is a pathway to impact. Depending on your reasons for being online, you will need to invest more or less time in different ways.

Once you have established why you are online, the next step is to take stock of your current digital footprint, so you can assess whether or not you need to make changes. Here are a few quick and easy initial steps you can take:

- **Audit your digital footprint:** do a Google search for your name and the institution you work for and see what comes up. If you've Googled yourself before, it is worth downloading a new browser or using a colleague's device as Google will know that you are looking for you and not someone with a similar name, and automatically rank your institutional profile close to the top of the list. This is not what others searching for your name would see, unless they had searched for you a number of times in the past.
- **Interrogate your online identities:** what profiles come up when you search for your name? Are they for you or someone else? Is your main institutional profile on the first page or do other profiles get listed first? Do these other profiles represent you the way you would like to be seen by the outside world?
- **Prune, cultivate or consolidate your online identities:** first remove any non-professional identities or make them private. Next, ask yourself how each of these different profiles benefited you in the last year. If you aren't getting any value then don't waste your time keeping them up to date — remove your profile and focus your limited time on the profiles that are most likely to bring you the benefits you are seeking for your research. As part of this, you may consider consolidating many profiles into one or a few that you can more easily keep up to date. This may be as simple as ensuring that you have got links signposting the most relevant profiles (e.g. your Google Scholar publication list and Twitter account) from the profile that comes up first in a Google search (e.g. your institutional profile).
- **Actively manage your digital footprint:** regularly review and update all your online profiles every six months or so.

There are a number of low-risk online platforms for researchers to communicate their research that are worth investigating:

- If you've got an academic email address you can get a **Google Scholar** profile (Figure 11). Google will automatically populate your profile with your publications (you can correct it if there are mistakes) and rank them by citations. Now whenever one of your papers turns up in a Google Scholar search, your name will be hyperlinked from the author list to your profile so people can read more of your work, which could help boost citations.
- Unlike Google Scholar, **ResearchGate** (Figure 11) and **Academia.edu** are actually social media platforms because they enable researchers to engage in debate around the publications they list. Although higher risk than Google Scholar, which does not allow this, the networks are only open to researchers, so risks of online abuse are lower than public social media platforms. These platforms also automatically populate your profile so they don't take a lot of time. You may need to alter the settings in ResearchGate though to prevent it spamming your co-authors on your behalf whenever it finds new papers you've written.

When you join a new platform, make sure you are clear about your reasons for joining, and soon after you have joined, assess whether or not you are getting what you want from it. For example, I joined ResearchGate and Academia.edu at the same time to experiment with both platforms, and then closed one down to reduce the amount of time it took to keep things up to date. The danger is that your digital footprint grows arms and legs as you join new platforms, forget about them and they go out of date. This is an increasing problem for many researchers.

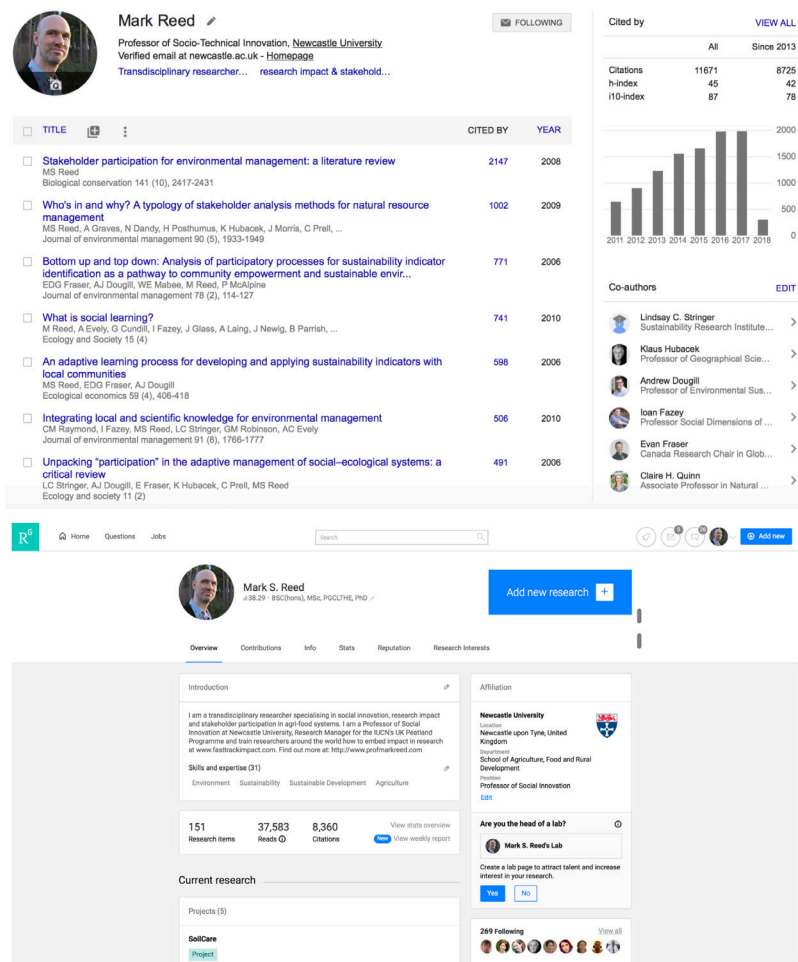


Figure 11: Google Scholar and ResearchGate profiles

Bringing coherence to a fractured digital footprint

The number of digital platforms that profile researchers' work is proliferating rapidly, leading to an increasingly fractured picture of their work. For some researchers, this problem is compounded by the fact that they work on multiple, very different issues, with different communities of researchers and stakeholders. Some researchers are experiencing unintended digital sprawl. Others have chosen to cultivate different identities across different platforms and accounts to engage with specific communities. Either way, the

proliferation of online identities can be confusing for people who just want to know who we are and what we do.

As a result, many researchers ask me which one platform they should be on. This is an attractive option in theory, as you only have one place to update. If you have to choose one place, then your employer will probably tell you that you should choose to focus on the profile on your institution's website. That is good enough for many researchers, but many want their work to be more visible or want to have more control over the way they organise and present their work than their institutional profile allows.

If you want to keep digital sprawl under control and are looking for just one other place to feature your research (other than your institutional profile), then your choice will need to reflect what you want your digital profile to do for you. If you want to reach out to other academics and primarily showcase your academic work, then Google Scholar and ResearchGate are popular platforms which make your work highly visible with minimal time input (they identify your publications for you, so you don't have to manually input them). If you want to face a broader audience, or aren't sure if you'll be hanging around in academia for long, then LinkedIn enables you to showcase publications, projects, presentations and more to a broad professional audience, but it requires manual entry.

To help you to decide which platform to focus on, check and see which ones already get ranked highly in a Google search for your name and employer. That way, you guarantee that people looking for you find something relevant and up to date, and you can signpost them from there to a small number of less highly ranked sites. By channelling traffic in this way, you can very quickly bring coherence to a fractured digital footprint.

You don't have to settle for one or two platforms, though; indeed, there are compelling reasons for engaging across multiple platforms, for example, to engage with different audiences via specific social media accounts that enable you to connect with specific groups of people. However, the more different profiles you have, the more confusing the picture may become for those looking in. If your digital profile is spread across multiple websites, platforms and accounts, then you need to find a way of bringing together these fragments to create a more coherent image of your work.

Your first challenge is to find a unifying phrase, concept or strapline that summarises the full range of your work effectively. As a researcher who studies people's interactions with the natural environment and knowledge exchange for impact, I came up with "knowing people, knowing nature" to summarise my work. I am often surprised at how quickly and effectively researchers manage to succinctly summarise what they do in plain English when I ask them to do so in a tweet (280 characters) during social media training. Give it a try...

Now you can copy the same phrase across multiple platforms, making it clear that you are the same person and not a different researcher. You can also start linking accounts, providing hyperlinks to the places you feel best represent your work and which you keep up to date most regularly. This can be a nice way of avoiding spending too much time on sites where you have to manually enter your information (like your institutional profile), instead providing summary information and signposting to sites that are easier to keep up to date. You can do the same with social media accounts (for example, in the biography for @fasttrackimpact on Twitter, it says that "tweets are by @profmarkreed" and in the biography for @profmarkreed, it says that I do "research impact training @fasttrackimpact").

Your final option, which is the most powerful (but also the most challenging to pull off effectively), is to create your own personal website which all other platforms point to as the main source of information about your work. On your personal website you can configure your material in any design you want, and have full control over updates. You can create your own narrative that links your various identities as a researcher, pointing people to specific platforms if they want to engage with you about those issues in greater depth. If you link to your personal website from your university profile, Google should fairly quickly start to rank your website at a similar place in search results to your institutional profile.

Figure 12 shows examples of personal websites made for researchers by Fast Track Impact. The front page of Christopher Raymond's site links to the other platforms he is active on (you can visit it at: www.christopherraymond.com). At the top of Heather Flowe's publications page, she has featured papers that she wants to be read and cited (see: www.heatherdflowe.co.uk). On my own

website, you can see the strapline I created to try and sum up the diverse research I do (see: www.profmarkreed.com).

You can contain (or at least make sense of) the digital sprawl, and if you do, you may find that you spend less time updating the ‘digital you’ and more time benefiting from the collaborations that arise from a coherent digital profile.



Figure 12: Examples of personal websites created for researchers by Fast Track Impact

How to use social media more strategically to drive impact

When I was asked to apply for my current Chair position, I tried to protest that I was in the middle of my longest ever losing streak for research funding and that I could never live up to the reputation of the retiree who had vacated the Chair (who is my all-time academic hero). I was told that my record spoke for itself, according to my website, and that I should think about it. The majority of plenary talks I'm invited to give come via my website, and I've built an international training business through social media, without ever once paying for advertising. Time invested building and curating your digital footprint really can pay dividends for your career.

Moreover, having a strong digital brand as an academic engenders credibility and trust with many of the people who you might like to use your research, making it easier for you to connect with them. The next section shows you how you can harness the power of social media to drive research impact. If you use social media strategically, as I'm going to suggest, then it doesn't have to take up huge amounts of time. It doesn't have to intrude on your personal life or get you into trouble. And you may discover, to your surprise, that you've actually got some quite interesting things to say, which other people find both engaging and useful.

Researchers are in a unique position on social media because we have easily verifiable credibility as authoritative voices. Box 11 uses a fascinating (though somewhat grisly) example to illustrate how this works. Although it is unlikely that any research finding would ever 'go viral' to the extent that the information in Box 11 did, it is possible for researchers to achieve significant reach via social media. I once did an experiment with a government department to see if we could use Twitter to get public feedback on a policy consultation. The experiment failed because (as you could probably have told me) no one was able to provide meaningful feedback in 140 characters. However, it did raise awareness of the consultation, with some of our tweets reaching a potential audience of over 40,000 people.



Figure 13: Screenshots of Twitter analytics for one month from Twitter.com

An analysis of @fasttrackimpact on Twitter over a period of one month shows that my 20 tweets were seen by 218,000 people (Twitter's definition of 'impressions') (Figure 13; that figure rises to a total of 5 million tweets seen over the last two years). I was mentioned in the tweets of 112 people, 4,937 people viewed my Twitter profile to find out more about Fast Track Impact, and I got 352 new followers that month. Twitter's analytics even tell me the interests of my followers and demographic information that might help me further tailor my messages to my audience. These statistics may not be 'viral', but they illustrate the power of social media to disseminate messages. Karine Nahon and Jeff Hemsley, in their book *Going Viral*, suggest that: "a viral information event creates a temporally bound, self-organised interest network in which membership is based on an interest in the information content or in belonging to the interest network of others."

Believe it or not, as researchers we can create a 'viral information event' based on our research. In fact, as researchers we have an advantage over almost anyone else if we want to be listened to. Since the 1950s, research has shown that people are more likely to adopt the position of a source if they perceive that source to be credible.

People are surprisingly discerning in what they trust and believe on social media, and if you have a link to your institutional webpage and are clearly who you say you are, you have instant credibility in the eyes of many social media users. This means that our voices carry weight in this sphere, and this gives us an immediate head start if we want to communicate our research to a wide audience and engage people in conversations about our work online. Although we might constantly tell our students to check their sources and use peer-reviewed material, the average person, including many decision-makers, rely on anecdotal evidence that they find online. Instead of worrying about this, we can do something about it by adding our voice to the debate and making high-quality evidence accessible to those who are debating the issues we research. To do this, however, we need to go beyond digital dissemination and online marketing to having digital conversations.

Most academics use social media without any clear plan — they're just putting out material and hoping for the best. But if you really want to harness the power of social media to generate impact from your research, you need a plan. If you don't have a plan, then you

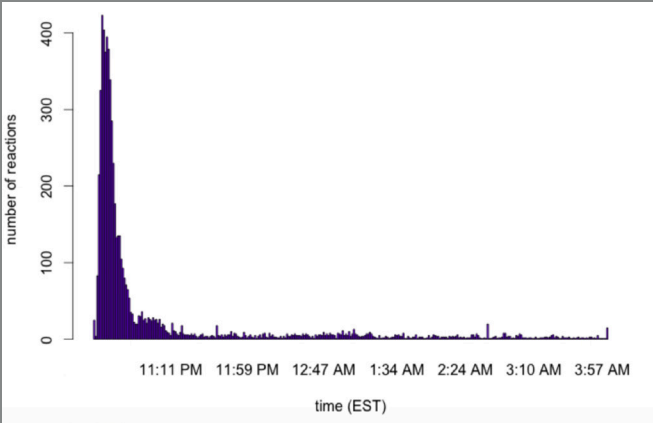
may well be blogging and tweeting into empty space. It doesn't take long to think strategically about your use of social media, but when you do you'll discover that your time on social media has never been better spent. With a clear plan of who you're trying to reach and why, you can take your use of social media to a completely new level.

Box 11: The role of credibility in viral communication

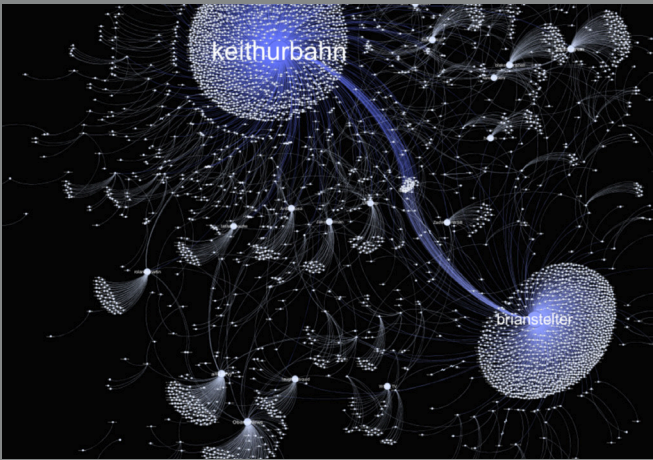
At 21.45 Eastern Time on 1 May 2011, the US White House announced that President Obama would be addressing the nation in 45 minutes time. Naturally, rumours rapidly began to circulate, as people attempted to guess what the announcement would be about. Two theories began to circulate, namely that either Muammar Gaddafi, former ruler of Libya, or Osama Bin Laden had been caught. However, neither theory gained particular traction until the appearance of the now famous tweet by Keith Urbahn, chief of staff to Donald Rumsfeld, 38 minutes after the news conference was officially announced. It was his position, visible on his Twitter profile, that gave him the credibility to overcome the rumours and initiate one of the best-documented viral events on social media.



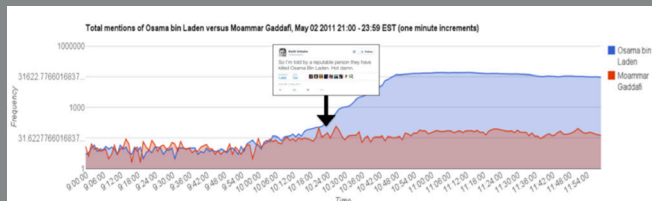
Despite only having 1000 followers on Twitter, after one minute there had been 80 reactions (retweets and mentions), and this reached 300 after 2 minutes. In that second minute, New York Times reporter Brian Stelter tweeted, “Chief of staff former defense sec. Rumsfeld, @keithurbahn, tweets: ‘I’m told by a reputable person they have killed Osama Bin Laden.’”



Number of times Keith Urbahn’s tweet was retweeted



Brian Stelter had 50,000 followers, and his tweet was retweeted hundreds of times in a matter of minutes. Twenty-four minutes after Keith Urbahn's original tweet, the news was being mentioned on Twitter 30,000 times per minute. What is particularly interesting about this example is that many others were guessing correctly before Keith Urbahn's tweet, and rumours about Colonel Gaddafi continued to circulate without ever taking off. The key reason that this tweet initiated a viral information event was the credibility of the source.



As a researcher, if you link to your institutional webpage and/or mention your university in your Twitter profile, you instantly have credibility in the eyes of the average Twitter user (whether you deserve it or not). This means that your voice can carry weight in discussions on social media.

Number of times Keith Urbahn's tweet was retweeted

How to make a social media strategy

The easiest way to make sure your time on social media really counts is to have a social media strategy. If you can answer these four questions, then you've got yourself a social media strategy. Simple.

1. What offline impacts do you want to achieve via social media?
2. Who are you trying to reach, what are they interested in and what platforms are they on?
3. How can you make your content actionable, shareable and rewarding for those who interact with you so you can start building relationships and move the conversation from social media to real life?
4. Who can you work with to make your use of social media more efficient and effective?

You don't have to write anything down — you just need to act on the answers to these questions to stop wasting time and start generating impacts on social media. If you want to write stuff down, Table 5 is a logic model that breaks each of these questions down and provides you with prompts to help ensure that you are doing things on social media that will credibly lead to real impact (rather than just followers, views or likes). You can download an editable version of the table from my website at: www.fasttrackimpact.com/resources.

1. What impacts do you want from your use of social media?

If you want your time on social media to really count, you need to know exactly what you are trying to achieve:

- Use the Fast Track Impact Planning Template to devise a broad impact plan for your research (Table 3, Chapter 10).
- Identify any strands to your impact that could be achieved via social media, and write your impact goals for social media in the first column of the template. Try and make them as specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely (SMART) as possible.

Table 5: Logic model showing how each of the four questions in a social media strategy can be linked to impact goals to ensure you design a strategy that efficiently drives the impacts you are interested in

Impact goal	What would I expect to see happening offline that would indicate my engagement with social media is moving me closer to this impact goal?	Which stakeholders or publics on social media can help me reach this goal?	Which social media platforms are these stakeholders and publics most active on?	What aspects of my research are these stakeholders and publics most likely to be interested in?	Linked to these interests, what content, resources or opportunities would these groups find most valuable or rewarding?	What actions or activities could I promote via social media to encourage deeper engagement with my research, which might lead to conversations offline that could help achieve impact?	What are the main social media accounts that have content linked to this impact goal? What can I learn from their most popular material? Regularly update this list of accounts and insights, and promote your work to their followers by directly requesting retweets/likes or following their followers.

- Identify indicators that will tell you if your use of social media is taking you closer to the offline goals you have identified from your impact plan. Social media metrics are the easy part. Put some thought into easily-measured indicators that will tell you if you are beginning to translate online influence into offline impact.
- Choose easy-to-measure indicators that will show you whether or not your engagement with social media is moving you closer to your impact goals.

2. Who are you trying to reach?

If you know your audience, you will be able to generate content that they love, and start to build influence online:

- Use the publics/stakeholder analysis template (Table 4, Chapter 14) to systematically identify groups of stakeholders and publics most likely to be interested in your work, or who might benefit from or be able to use your work to help you achieve your impact goals. Write down these groups in second column of the template.
- Using the same publics/stakeholder analysis template, identify what aspects of your research these stakeholders and publics are most likely to be interested in.
- Identify which social media platforms these stakeholders and publics are most active on. If you are using a different platform, you will need to switch.

3. How can you make your content actionable, shareable and rewarding?

If you want your message to travel far and wide, it is worth thinking about how to craft messages that are shareable, rewarding and likely to lead to actions that can help you reach your impact goals:

- What actions or activities could you promote via social media to encourage deeper engagement with your research, which might lead to conversations offline that could help achieve impact? For example, you might be trying to get people to read your blog, comment on it, cite your work in their own blog, sign up for a newsletter, sign a pledge or come to an event.
- What can you do to make your message more shareable? There is evidence that social media messages with images or videos are more likely to get engagement than text-only messages. Is there some way that you can draw a parallel or comparison to your research findings that might surprise people, and make them

more likely to share your work?

- Linked to the interests of your stakeholders and publics, what content, resources or opportunities would these groups find particularly valuable or rewarding? Often people follow researchers, research projects or institutions on social media because they are looking for up-to-date, unbiased coverage of the issues they are interested in, so consider how you could offer information that exceeds expectations in terms of both its quality and accessibility. If someone clicks on a link expecting to see the latest research and discovers it is much easier to understand than they expected because the research is described in a blog with an infographic or short video, and they discover lots of other useful resources on your website, they are more likely to tell others about your work and drive traffic to your site for you.

4. Who can help me?

If all this sounds way too time-consuming, then there are a number of ways you can get your message out without having to invest time in building your own following on social media, for example:

- Identify the social media accounts that have content linked to your impact goals and have large followings. Then approach the account owner to ask them to share or repost something you've written from your own account. Alternatively, give them the link and some suggested accompanying text, and ask them to put it out on your behalf from their account. I usually start by asking them via the platform, moving to email and then telephone if I don't get a reply. For large organisations, ask to speak to a member of their press office or social media team, and once you find the person sending out the material, make your pitch to them. If you have targeted an account that is working close to your field, then it should be easy to make the argument that your material will add value to their work.
- Consider taking a team approach to your social media, if there are others you work with who are naturally good at crafting messages on social media or who already have large followings. Agree to promote each other's material where relevant. Consider asking your post-doc to manage the project social media presence if they are naturally more competent than you.

Case study

I'll conclude this chapter with an example of a social media campaign I helped with, linked to my research. I will explain how we answered each of the four questions above to generate impact. In 2014, I helped develop a #peatfree campaign to promote the use of peat-free composts instead of peat-based ones, which are leading to the destruction of lowland peat bog habitats around the world. The campaign was led by Project Maya (www.mayaproject.org), supported by a host of minor celebrities and charities, and drew on research I had done with the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) UK Peatland Programme in one of my research projects (Sustainable Uplands).



What offline impacts do you want to achieve via social media?

We started with two clear goals. The first was a long-standing goal I had developed with IUCN to restore 2 million hectares of damaged peatbogs by 2025 via a private-public policy mechanism based on my research. This dovetailed with Project Maya's goal to raise public awareness about the hidden value and beauty of peat bogs. I was particularly interested in this goal because we had feedback from companies we had approached to invest in peatland restoration that their customers and stakeholders didn't like peat bogs. Project Maya had their own linked goal, as a Community Interest Company with peat-free products that they were using to raise money for their charitable work, buying and turning inner city land into nature reserves and allotments to give back to local communities. As the work progressed, however, we found that there was strong interest from the global policy community in our campaign, so we added an additional impact, to "inform global policy to generate far-reaching and significant benefits for human well-being, climate and nature through peatland restoration". More specifically, the goal was to facilitate the uptake of the policy mechanism we had designed in the UK in at least one of the countries responsible for 95% of greenhouse gases from global peatlands, leading to new peatland restoration in that country.

Who are you trying to reach, what are they interested in and what platforms are they on? Initially, our target audience was UK gardeners who currently used peat-based composts, but as the work progressed, we also targeted the international policy world. There is a thriving community of gardeners on Twitter, so we designed our campaign for this platform. We then took materials from the social media campaign to an international policy event, to pursue our new, wider goals.

How can you make your content actionable, shareable and rewarding? I'll take each of these in turn:

- **Actionable:** For gardeners, the action was simple—read our blog and sign a pledge to go peat-free in your garden. If we could get enough pledges, we would then use this to take our message to the mass media. Sadly, that never happened. However, we generated enough attention that I was contacted by an environmental charity working on a government taskforce to try and work out how to phase out peat-free composts from gardening and horticulture. At the time, industry representatives outnumbered other members 2:1 and an argument was made

for me to join the taskforce as the only academic member. This happened as a direct result of the social media campaign and gave me a unique opportunity to feed evidence into the work of the taskforce, which is making strong progress towards phasing out peat-based compost in the UK. The second impact that arose from this campaign was more indirect, via the use of the materials we developed for the campaign at an international policy conference. This led to an IUCN resolution and to the IUCN team I was working with being invited to join a UN initiative to protect peatlands internationally. As a result of this, I am now able to feed research findings into this international group as I continue to pursue my global impact goals. Whether for gardeners, national policy-makers or the international community, we had a clear, actionable message: stop using peat-based composts.

- **Shareable:** To increase the shareability of our campaign, we worked on a number of evidence-based messages that presented our research in unexpected ways. We commissioned traditional infographics to support these messages, but during testing on social media these didn't get much of a response. We therefore redesigned the messages to appear on top of striking images of peat bogs, and immediately received significantly more online engagement (Figure 14). To craft our message as powerfully as possible, we used the marketing approach of making our message personal (rather than talking about peatlands, we talked about peat composts, which people were more likely to be familiar with and have a direct relationship with); unexpected (most of our audience were previously unaware that the products they were buying caused destruction to peatlands); visual (the images were chosen from stock photography websites to be visually striking, with strong colours and appealing aesthetics) and visceral (the facts we chose to highlight were quite shocking) (Box 12). We also created a campaign hashtag (#peatfree) and contacted a number of accounts with large followings to ask if they would consider adding the hashtag to their profile photo. We chose this hashtag because it was already in use by the sustainable gardening community, ensuring that people would find useful material via the hashtag even if we weren't providing new content.
- **Rewarding:** The main reward was information, but not only about the damage caused by peat composts. We provided information about how to find peat-free composts, and how to make sure they would perform well in the garden. Similarly, access to new, evidence-based ideas was the reward for members of the policy community who engaged with our team.



Figure 14: Messages from Project Maya's 2014 #peatfree campaign

Who can you work with to make your use of social media more efficient and effective? Project Maya identified a number of minor celebrities and charities who they thought might support the campaign, and reached out to each one individually, asking if they would put their name and image or logo on the website, endorsing the campaign. Each of these celebrities and organisations then linked to the campaign from their accounts, significantly boosting the reach of the campaign. The national and international policy impacts would not have happened were it not for the influence and reach of two major environmental charities who picked up on the campaign. The first was a charity that was approached to endorse the campaign, and the second was a charity who I had already targeted and begun working with as one of the most influential organisations working in the policy sphere around the issues I was researching.

Box 12: Make it PUVV

Successful online engagement is:

- **Personal:** Create designs with a personal hook in mind and ensure the campaign cultivates the feeling of personal relevance.
- **Unexpected:** People like consuming and then sharing new information. Work to pique their curiosity and reframe the familiar.
- **Visual:** It is important to show, don't tell. Use photos and visuals.
- **Visceral:** A campaign that triggers the senses and taps into emotions is much more likely to be successfully shared.

In conclusion, I hope this chapter has opened your eyes to the huge potential of the online realm to generate impacts from research. If this is something you are interested in pursuing further, I hope that the chapter has also made you aware of the unique risks you will face as a researcher in this realm. I have tried to provide methods that can enable you to mitigate as many of those risks as possible. For some of you, this chapter will have confirmed everything you previously feared about social media and reinforced your decision not to engage. My hope is that you continue this stance with pride, being able to justify your position to others more effectively than before. Whether you protect your time by disengaging from social media or by engaging with some of the techniques I've suggested in this chapter, my final plea is that you keep asking yourself one question, again and again: could I be doing something else more useful right now?