

Chapter 18

How to generate research impact from Twitter and LinkedIn

In this chapter, I want to explain in more detail how you can use two social media platforms to generate impact from your research. I have chosen Twitter and LinkedIn because these tend to be used most widely to best effect by researchers from across the disciplines.

However, there are many other platforms available, and some are particularly useful for certain purposes, for example, Facebook for public engagement events, finding research subjects or engaging with otherwise hard-to-reach groups. If you are trying to reach younger people, you may want to target Snapchat or some of the other newer social networks. If your work is highly visual, then Pinterest or Instagram might work well for you. Ask yourself the first two questions from my social media strategy in the previous chapter and make sure you know what you're trying to achieve with whom, and select your platform accordingly.

How can Twitter enhance the impact of your research?

Twitter is one of the most powerful social media platforms for academics, given the number of highly focused and influential networks of people who use it. Effective use of Twitter doesn't just amplify your research, it allows conversations to take place about it. This can enrich your research and enable you to make a far greater impact.

1. Tweet yourself, your projects and your institution

In addition to your personal Twitter profile, consider opening accounts for some of your research groups or projects. Each of your research projects is likely to have a different focus, and you're probably a member of more than one group or institution in your university that doesn't have a Twitter account. A project Twitter account is an easy addition to your next pathways to

impact statement when you're applying for funding, and some sort of engagement with social media is increasingly expected by reviewers. However, don't just add it for the sake of it — make sure that you have identified publics or stakeholders who are likely to preferentially engage with you on social media, and have clear impact goals you will pursue via a social media strategy.

Opening an institutional account will usually need to be a group decision. If everyone agrees, others can either send you material to tweet or you can give everyone the Twitter username and password to tweet themselves (if so, you'll need to agree on the nature of material you want posted, or it may be easier to decide on the things you want to avoid).

Open accounts for major research projects that will be going for a few years, and that you hope will have some form of successor project in the future (so you've got time to build a following and don't have too many accounts to manage). Again, the burden doesn't have to be entirely yours — it can be delegated to a post- doc and shared with other team members. Other ideas you might want to consider:

1. Copy and save the link to your homepage, include this link in newsletters and presentations, and consider putting it in your email signature.
2. Every time you do a conference/workshop/seminar presentation, put your slides online (e.g. using SlideShare) and tweet them.
3. Every time you get a paper published, tweet the link to the article on the publisher's website (if it's not open access, consider adding that you can send copies if need be). If you can get permission, upload a copy on ResearchGate or similar and tweet the link.
4. Tweet quotes from speakers at conferences you attend, using the conference hashtag (make one up if there isn't one), to connect with other delegates and make them aware of your work.
5. Set up alerts (e.g. from Google News and Google Scholar) for key words and authors that are particularly relevant to your work, so you can be the first to let your followers know about new developments linked to your shared interests.
6. When you've got a tweet that is of much wider, general interest, you can retweet it from your other project/institutional accounts to reach a much larger audience than you could ever command from your personal or one project account.
7. Next time you're revising your website, why not consider adding buttons to enable readers to share what they're reading via Twitter and other social media platforms?

2. Don't just wait for people to find you: actively promote your Twitter stream

There are some easy things you can do to promote your Twitter stream, like including links on your homepage, project websites and in your email signature. But more active promotion of your Twitter feed can attract many more followers:



- Make sure you've got an effective biography and enough really informative/useful tweets in your stream (typically with a link to more information) before actively marketing what you're doing.
- Contact relevant people with large followings to ask if they would retweet key messages you've sent — tweet or direct message them via Twitter, and if that doesn't work, find their email address via an internet search and email (or phone) them.
- Use popular hashtags (#) to make your tweets visible to more people (e.g. #PhDchat and #ECRchat). Notice which hashtags people you're following are using, and use them. If you're planning a Twitter campaign on a particular topic (e.g. linked to a new paper or policy brief), you could make up your own hashtag, but for it to work, others will need to use it, so you may want to work on getting a key tweet including your hashtag retweeted by others with larger followings.
- Have a growth strategy...

There is one growth strategy that is used by almost every organisation on Twitter that has an impact goal, whether that goal is profit or social good. Despite the technique making it into the peer-reviewed literature in 2016 (Schnitzler et al., 2016, International Journal of Nursing Studies 59: 15-26), most researchers have never heard of it. This isn't for everyone; most researchers do not need to become influential online to achieve their goals. However, if you have identified that social media is a potentially powerful pathway to impact with particular publics or stakeholders, you need to become influential. In social media land, influence = numbers.

So how do you do it?

8. Have a social media strategy: know what impacts you want to achieve through Twitter with which groups and come up with some indicators that will tell you if Twitter is actually helping you generate these offline impacts (see previous chapter).
9. Set up a professional (project or thematic) account from which you can promote research to specific audiences (and which you will feel comfortable promoting explicitly).
10. Be credible and visual: link to content and use images.
11. Curate your top 3 tweets: whenever you are leaving the platform for a while, make sure that your last three tweets (including a pinned tweet if you have one) effectively represent the best of what you put out from that account. To do this, look to see which of your recent tweets got most engagement and retweet these to the top of your timeline.

12. Only tweet when you've got something worth saying (even if that isn't often): as a researcher, you are more likely to build a following and reputation if your content is of consistently high quality.
13. Get the attention of influencers: in your tweet, tag relevant accounts that have significant followings, send the tweet via a direct message to them, email them or pick up the telephone.
14. Put your high-quality material in front of people who are looking for content like yours: find others on Twitter who are generating similar content to you, and follow their followers regularly. You can assume that people who have recently followed a very similar account to yours are looking for high-quality material on the subjects you write about. Assuming your content is good, a high proportion of these people will follow you back once you have drawn your account to their attention. Many of them will retweet the content that made them follow you and many of their followers will like what they see and follow you too. Twitter may prompt you to confirm your password the first time you start using this strategy, but as long as you are generating good content and people are following you, Twitter will allow you to continue using this strategy because you are demonstrably adding value to the network and not a spammer. Depending on how well this works, you may hit a 'follow limit', but there are many websites and apps that can help you quickly unfollow accounts that did not follow you back, so you can continue using the strategy. As you follow increasingly more people, you will need to start reading your timeline from another account or from Twitter lists.
15. Analyse your performance: Twitter has built in analytics that will tell you which tweets are most successful — learn from what works and improve your practice.

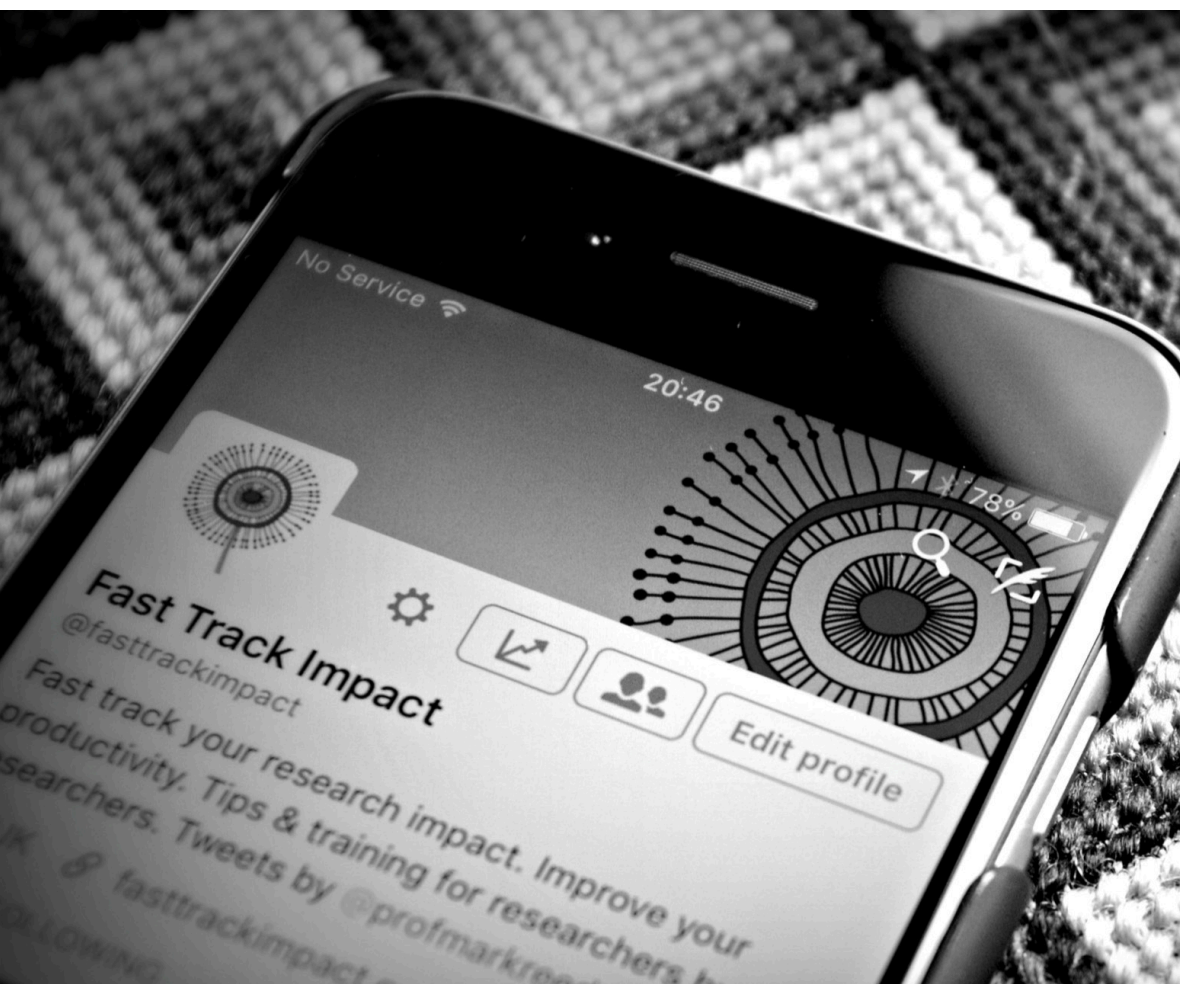
3. Work on your signal-to-noise ratio

As a researcher, you need to build your reputation in your chosen field. Twitter can help you reach a network of highly relevant researchers, as well as potential users of your research, and make them aware of your work. To do this effectively, you need to decide what it is that you want to be 'known' for, and then work on building your reputation in that area. Most people will follow you because they share your core interests (your 'signal'), but they will rapidly lose interest if too many of your tweets are not relevant to these interests (effectively 'noise' they have to filter out when scanning through their timeline):

- Consider how useful and relevant each tweet is before sending it, to increase the likelihood that your followers find your tweets useful and keep following you.
- Ensure the majority of your tweets have hyperlinks to further information.
- Provide an image (or video) to accompany your tweets where possible (research by Twitter shows that tweets with images are retweeted 35% more than text-only tweets, and videos give a 28% uplift). Bear in mind that some web links automatically generate an accompanying image (e.g. many blogs, newspaper sites and video sites automatically generate an image, title and first line of the article below your tweet once it has been sent).
- Avoid sending too many tweets and retweets at a time—if you're at a conference and tweeting every couple of minutes, followers who aren't interested in the conference are likely to get fed up with you dominating their timeline on a single narrow issue and unfollow you.
- Avoid using too many acronyms and abbreviations in your tweets — they may make sense to you but many people reading fast will simply skim over your tweet if they don't understand you instantly. It is better to say less in complete words than to try and cram too much in if it means you resort to acronyms and abbreviations.
- If you're increasingly tweeting about things that are very different from your core interests, consider setting up a new Twitter stream devoted to that issue/interest.
- If you're tweeting from a project or institutional account, try not to mix work and personal tweets. Remember you're tweeting on behalf of a group, so telling people about what you're doing on holiday is going to sound a bit strange (either your institution appears to be on holiday or it becomes clear that the Twitter stream is really only about one person —who's on holiday — and not the whole group). If you do want to mix personal and work tweets (some commentators suggest this can help build rapport with your followers), make sure your biography clearly states the name of the person tweeting on behalf of the project or organisation.
- If you find that you've started automatically skimming or skipping tweets by certain people, the chances are they rarely have anything particularly relevant/useful to say — mute or unfollow them and reduce the amount of noise you have to deal with.

4. Get your timing right

Because of the way Twitter works, most people only read a fraction of the tweets in their timeline, so if you're tweeting on a day and time that none of your audience are reading their timelines, you could be tweeting into the void (for example, tweeting in the night might be useful if your primary audience is on the other side of the world, but if not, then your tweets will probably be lost deep in your main audience's timelines by the time they wake up and start reading tweets over breakfast). Timing is also about linking to the issues of the day — reframing to link into an ongoing news story or debate can really get your research some attention:



- Link your tweets to ongoing events in your discipline and the news, using linked hashtags where relevant
- If you've got a lot to say, don't tweet in bursts; rather spread your tweets through the day, using something like HootSuite to automatically schedule your tweets to be sent at different times of the day and week (so you don't have to keep interrupting your day). Someone who only logs onto Twitter at the end of the day may not get to the three tweets you put out at 8 a.m., but will probably get at least one of the ones that were scheduled for the afternoon. Warning: your friends might think you have super-human powers when they discover you're tweeting while lecturing or speaking at a conference (many people actually schedule conference tweets in advance, based on the programme timings)
- Get to know when your followers are most likely to read your tweets and put your material out at these times. For example, from experience I have found that @fasttrackimpact followers are most likely to engage with material between 8 and 9 a.m. on weekdays, so this is when most of my tweets are posted
- To increase the chances of people following you when they look through your tweets, I like to avoid the repetition of sending copies of the same tweet at different times of day. Instead, I will retweet key messages at different times of the day, and on successive mornings, to make sure they appear in the timelines of most of my followers
- Although this goes against all other advice for Twitter users, I think that quality is more important than quantity for researchers who want to build a strong reputation online. Rather than trying to tweet at least once a day, as many people recommend, I tweet when I have got something useful to say. As a result, I may send less than ten tweets in a month, retweeting my most popular previous tweets, and making sure I leave my best three tweets at the top of my timeline as a 'shop window' for anyone who comes across my account when I am leaving it for a few days or weeks.

5. Use Twitter as part of a wider social media strategy and impact plan

Twitter is just one of many social media platforms, so consider putting your material out via other platforms too, and remember that people who might use your research aren't always using social media, so you're going to want to think about other ways of reaching out to your audiences:

- Come up with a properly thought-through social media strategy as part of a wider impact plan for your research, whether as an individual, a project or an institution (see previous chapter).
- Adapt your approach to each platform, e.g. I will see how my messages resonate on Twitter, and only put those that get significant engagement out via the Fast Track Impact Facebook page or LinkedIn. I will sometimes add a personal twist to my own Facebook posts about my work, which are few and far between. On LinkedIn, I will sometimes add more detail, for example, linking to the paper, blog and video on separate lines.
- Remember that social media is just one form of communication, and that there will be many who are interested in your work who are not using these technologies. Keep up your newsletter — printing and posting where relevant (but still tweeting the link to the PDF, hosted somewhere you can count hits like Scribd, ResearchGate or Issuu). Keep presenting at conferences and running workshops for the end users of your research (tweeting videos of what you do on YouTube and putting your presentations on SlideShare, of course).

6. Constantly refine your practice

Watch how other academics, projects or institutions with large followings tweet:

- Learn good practice from others, and experiment yourself.
- Take note when something annoys you about the way other people use Twitter and avoid doing that yourself. Monitor and learn from your successes and flops:
- Which of your tweets are most likely to get retweeted? Which tweets don't get retweeted? What do they have in common, and what can you learn from this? How were you using Twitter on the day you got 10 new followers?
- Put (open access) documents that you cite on Twitter in places where you can count hits — which tweets make people click on the link (and presumably read your document), and which ones fall flat? What can you learn from this?
- Experiment with different headlines in Twitter to see which ones work best — try and reframe your point and tweet it again later that day, and see if you have more success.
- Read through the material you're tweeting and find quotes you can use to promote the link in a slightly different way — sometimes one of these quotes really takes off, far more

effectively than the headline. If you're tweeting a blog you wrote, then you might want to consider retitling the blog at this point!

7. Remember it's all about relationships

Don't forget that Twitter is about communicating and building a relationship with people and not just marketing your own or your institution's work at them. So, remember to check other similar institutions'/academics' tweets and respond to those that are interesting. Twitter allows your work to reach a much wider audience and also enables more discussion of your work with others who may put it into practice.

Also, as with any other social setting, there is 'Twitter etiquette', for example, if someone gave you the information you are tweeting, credit him or her with it, either by using "via @person1" (if they are a Twitter user) or as a quote next to their original tweet.

Using LinkedIn for research impact

LinkedIn has unique capabilities you can harness for achieving research impact. It is particularly effective for engaging with stakeholders, rather than publics, because of its focus on professionals. If you have done a publics/stakeholder analysis and know which groups will benefit most or have most power to facilitate your impact, LinkedIn has a powerful search function that will enable you to target your message to key stakeholders based on city or country, the organisation they work for (or previously worked at), the sector or industry they work in more broadly, or their interests.

I will explain how I run social media campaigns via LinkedIn using an example from my own research to illustrate. Like any good social media campaign, you need to start with a clear impact goal and know your audience. In my example, the impact goal was to get private investment in peatland restoration. Our market research had identified a number of business types that were more likely to be interested in the opportunity than others, and so we used LinkedIn to target anyone with a job title including 'corporate (social) responsibility' and 'sustainability' in large companies from the relevant sectors:

- The first step is to connect with stakeholders from organisations you would like to work with to deliver impact. Use the features in

the advanced search on LinkedIn — it is a surprisingly powerful search engine. You don't have to have worked with them before to be able to connect with them (though in some cases you will need to Google their email address to make the connection request). Use your current job title in your connection request, and include a short note (rather than just using the default message), explaining that you're interested in their work and think they might be interested in your research (you'll get a much better acceptance rate this way). When I did this for my peatland research, over 90% accepted my connection request.



- Once you've got connections with a good range of stakeholders, create status updates and blogs on LinkedIn specifically related to the impacts you want to achieve. In this way, you are starting to put your work in front of people so they become more familiar with it and are more likely to trust you as a credible source of information and help. LinkedIn Pulse blogs are highly visible on the platform so consider using this. If you are blogging elsewhere, consider copying the first paragraph and image to a LinkedIn Pulse blog, and then linking from there to the original post. In my case, I linked to previous blogs in this way and wrote a new blog linking to an event that was coming up (that I would later be inviting people to via LinkedIn).
- Find LinkedIn groups talking about issues linked to your research, request to join and contribute to the discussion before adding in links to your work.
- After some time of generating content in this way, and making yourself visible to your new contacts on the network, start interacting with your LinkedIn contacts by sending them messages about your work. These go straight to their email inbox and they can reply from their email, so it's easy for people to respond to you. According to your social media strategy and impact plan, you should have a clear goal in mind when you are reaching out to people. Ask yourself what you want to achieve and what they will gain from interacting with you. In my case, I was inviting them to an event where they would be able to find out more about my work, as well as a lot of other relevant stuff (it was part of a wider conference). I was pitching a specific side event, where we would be putting forward our investment opportunity. Interestingly, I was given the opportunity to sign up for a 30-day free trial of LinkedIn's premium product at this time, and used this to send InMail messages to around 50 additional contacts who were not connections of mine. Not a single one replied. The secret of the (free) approach I took was that I had subtly built trust with my audience before approaching them with my request.

Our social media strategy worked, and we got lots of relevant people at our launch event where we pitched our investment opportunity. However, we failed to get impact from this event as these people informed us that the decisions we were asking them to make could only be made by Chief Executive Officers. At this point, we switched strategy to an offline alternative pathway to impact to get to this hard-to-reach group. At the time of writing, we now have over 20 projects funded across the UK.

Finally, if you want to see how I use Twitter and LinkedIn to drive impact, or simply want to discuss anything you've read in this book, you can find me on Twitter @profmarkreed and @fasttrackimpact or search for my name and Newcastle University to find me on LinkedIn.