

How Academics and Researchers Can Get More Out of Social Media

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Lina Duque



In today's digital age, social media competence is a critical communication tool for academics. Whether you're looking to engage students, increase awareness of your research, or garner media coverage for your department, engaging in social media will give you a competitive edge.

Here is a case study that demonstrates this point. When Marianne Hatzopoulou, a civil engineering professor at the University of Toronto, needed to get the word out about her study on cyclists, she resorted to Twitter. Hatzopoulou, who was researching the impact of air pollution on the behaviour of cyclists, posted a few tweets, encouraging people to fill out a survey. Twitter seemed daunting at first, especially that she had under 100 followers, but she [tweeted](#), nevertheless, and encouraged her team to tweet as well.

Hatzopoulou's Twitter activity caught the attention of a cycling magazine which published a blog post about her study. A reporter with the local paper Metro Toronto saw the blog post and reached out to her for more info. Their one-hour phone conversation led to a front-page [story](#) the next day about the hazards of air pollution. That media coverage put her on the radar of a major network, [Global TV](#), and a [radio show](#) with the national Canadian broadcaster CBC, which, with Earth Day approaching, were looking for stories related to the environment. Hatzopoulou was inundated with media requests, but the publicity around her work was a researcher's dream.

"It all started with a tweet," said Hatzopoulou. "The reach we've had has been unbelievable." The media activity, initiated by Twitter, has given Hatzopoulou and her team great momentum as they prepare to take the study to New York City and Montreal.

But how do you use social media effectively to gain a competitive advantage? Here are some guidelines to help you maximize your impact online.

Build a targeted profile. Who are you trying to talk to on social media? What do you want to tell them? Answering those two questions will help you identify your audience, content and tone. Generating targeted content will attract a targeted audience. Make sure your profile bio on social media platforms, such as LinkedIn and Twitter, spells out the value you provide. Let's say you are a scientist looking to make science fun and accessible, like Imogen Coe, a cell biologist and Dean of Science at Ryerson University in Toronto. Including the phrase "helping make science fun and accessible" in her [Twitter bio](#) is a clear indicator of the content she intends to share. Keeping her message focused on issues she's passionate about in science has helped her build a large network of scientists around the world – from Canada and the U.S. to the UK and New Zealand.

Engage your audience in meaningful conversations. Speaking up about issues of interest to you and your audience will help position yourself as a thought leader in your space. That rings true for Coe, who took to Twitter last year to express her views on a story that created much buzz in the science community. She was responding to Science magazine's career column, which advised a post-doc researcher to look the other way when the latter complained that her male supervisor was looking down her shirt. Appalled by that advice, Coe e-mailed Science magazine, offering alternative advice on how to deal with harassment. She then [tweeted](#) a screenshot of her e-mail, which was quickly retweeted and supported by scientists around the world.

A reporter with the Washington Post saw the tweet and contacted Coe to get her thoughts on the story. The next day, Coe's comments appeared in the [Washington Post](#). The dean's social engagement has amplified her message and helped her garner media attention as a respected source in her field. More importantly, her voice and that of others resulted in the original advice column being removed and replaced with crowdsourced advice, including Coe's, that helps the person being harassed.

Make social engagement a habit. Incorporate social media into your daily routine so you can stay up to speed on what your stakeholders and peers are talking about. A five-minute check-in on Twitter every day is more effective than one hour every two weeks. Go online, respond to others and engage your audience in conversations that matter to them.

"Social media really doesn't take that much time. I tend to use it mostly in the evenings before bedtime and in between meetings," [said](#) Santa Ono, president of the University of Cincinnati. Ono, who has over 69,000 followers on [Twitter](#) alone, is one of the most social media-savvy administrators in academia. His trademark hashtag #HottestCollegeinAmerica, which he initiated to promote conversations around his university, has caught on and is regularly used on Twitter.

Think before you post. While social media engagement is undeniably an effective tool in attracting media attention and raising one's profile, it may also backfire. For example, when Ono [shared](#) a few years ago a picture of himself with a former president of the university who had been criticized for forcing the resignation of a basketball coach, his tweet quickly received a backlash of negative comments. He removed the photo within five minutes of posting it. Ono's rule of thumb? Before pushing 'send,' he asks himself what the tweet would look like on the front page of USA Today, he told the [Chronicle](#).

Get acquainted with your school's social media policy and make sure your posts comply with the guidelines. You do, after all, represent your employer on social media, regardless of the "views are my own" disclaimers that may appear in your bio. For example, Coe, the Toronto school dean who received media coverage when she spoke up on Twitter, was posting comments that represented typical university policy on harassment, including her university's. Tweeting about controversial issues against school policy may potentially cause problems for her, she admits.

It doesn't matter whether you have a small following at first. Becoming a smart user of social media can help you translate your research into impact.

