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Connecting Researchers at the University of Bath

[Jez Cope](#) and [Geraldine Jones](#) describe a recent series of events introducing social media to research students at the University of Bath.

Introduction

The Connected Researcher initiative is a response to both local and sector-wide events. At the University of Bath groups of postgraduate research students from Chemistry and Social Sciences separately expressed an interest in finding out how to profile their own research and establish links with other researchers in their fields. Nationally there has been a growing wave of interest in the potential offered by social media for supporting all aspects of the research cycle as exemplified by the recent Digital Researcher events sponsored by Vitae [1] and the Research Information Network (RIN) publication *Social media: A guide for researchers* [2]. We sought to respond to the needs and aspirations of our researchers for participation in wider research-related communities through offering opportunities to discover the potential of social media.

Social Media and Research Communities

Put simply, social media are tools for social interaction using Web-based and mobile technologies (Wikipedia). These technologies, often referred to as Web 2.0 or social software, provide services that support users in generating and publishing their own content. The social interactions developed as a result of this activity can support engagement with communities of practice through networking and other co-operative and collaborative practices.

In short, social media can provide a new dimension to engaging with research communities. They may be central to an individual's area of research or more peripheral where interests intersect. Networking skills are key to engaging with these communities and social media offer tools and practices for maintaining, navigating and expanding these networks of like-minded people. In fact some argue that digital networking using social media or 'network literacy' is becoming a core professional skill [3]. Although the tools themselves (e.g. for blogging, microblogging, social networking, social bookmarking, media sharing etc.) are relatively simple to use, they make little sense when disconnected from a specific context or community. Indeed viewing them out of context has led to criticism that social media are trivial and only useful for propagating banal comment.

The Connected Researcher: Aims and Approach

The Connected Researcher (a term borrowed from colleagues at the University of Cardiff) initiative seeks to place social media firmly in the context of research, focusing on the processes and purposes of use. The initiative's aims broadly align with recommendations for facilitating the use of Web 2.0 tools among the research community put forward in a recent RIN publication [4] as follows:

- raising awareness of the range of tools and services and their relevance for different kinds of activities;
- publicising examples of successful use and good practice by research groups and networks across a range of disciplines;
- providing guidelines and training to help researchers make informed choices;
- helping to set standards and providing advice on curation and preservation.

However we were keen to steer away from a 'cookbook' approach, mindful of 'the risk of stifling innovation by attempts to impose particular systems or concepts of how they will be used.' [4]

Through a series of seminars and workshops we wanted to communicate the participatory practices that have evolved around the use of social media and in particular how these practices can support all aspects of the research cycle. We took a social learning approach, creating opportunities for interested but novice users to engage with researchers who already have some experience in successfully using social media. Participants in the Connected Researcher events were also exposed to a range of digital networking techniques as well as the potential benefits and challenges. As a result participants were able to identify personal and specific reasons for adopting social media in support of their research. Follow-up workshops then offered a hands-on session in getting started with specific social media tools including account creation and how to access and contribute to the associated information streams generated.

Linking to the Research Cycle

In order to demonstrate a range of ways in which social media can support or challenge research activity, we planned to link the Connected Researcher events to specific aspects of the research cycle as defined by Cann *et al.* [2]. They see research as essentially a collaborative process, broadly following four stages:

- identification of knowledge;
- knowledge creation;
- quality assurance of knowledge, and;
- dissemination of knowledge.

Identification of Knowledge

Finding relevant information can be a challenge to researchers with so much information 'out there'. Undertaking literature reviews using peer-reviewed sources has traditionally been regarded as a relatively solitary activity employing good search strategies. Social media can help with both the discovery and filtering of information

by using the collective knowledge of those engaged in related research. These processes and supporting technologies were explored as part of our first event.

Knowledge Creation

The potential for social media to aid in the creation of research knowledge is also wide-ranging, but possible tensions with existing publishing protocols can sometimes inhibit experimentation. The second event provided a forum for discussing these issues and an opportunity to create and use a blog.

Quality Assurance of Knowledge

In terms of quality-assured knowledge, social media offer new opportunities to gain formative feedback on ideas and share recommendations within and between research communities. How this activity dovetails with existing and formal research practice is also a subject for debate. This, together with a hands-on exploration of social bookmarking, provides the focus of the proposed third Connected Researcher event.

Dissemination of Knowledge

Finally, social media can add to existing mechanisms of disseminating research findings. However which mechanism to employ and when is likely to depend on the nature of the research and personal preference. The concluding event considers the role of new media (film, audio) in the dissemination of research findings.

Events So Far

Launch Event

On Thursday 14 April 2011, we launched the initiative with a morning of talks and workshops for researchers and postgraduate research students. We began with a talk from our guest speaker, Dr Tristram Hooley, Head of the International Centre for Guidance Studies (iCeGS) at the University of Derby and co-writer of *Social media: A guide for researchers* [2].

Tristram's main point was that most (if not all) of the processes involved in research are inherently social and can therefore be supported and enhanced through the use of social media tools. He discussed how online networking is an excellent way to build and maintain 'weak links'. They tend to involve large numbers of people with whom you would not usually come into contact, but who nonetheless can have a significant impact on your research through ideas generated in conversation over coffee or at a conference meal: 'lots of people who can help you a bit is better than a few people who can help you a lot.'

He described several practical reasons for researchers to make use of social media. Some were altruistic ('research moves more quickly if ideas are shared') while others were more self-centred ('you'll get information and references that will save you time and help you spot things that you would have missed'). Overall, he put forward a very persuasive case in favour of trying out social media.

Twitter

Following the talk and a short break for refreshments, Tristram introduced a group of students to Twitter [5] in the first of our two workshops. Twitter is the most popular

example of what is referred to as a ‘microblogging’ service. In simplest terms, microblogging involves posting a series of short messages (typically limited to 140 characters) on the Web.

There is a whole new language surrounding Twitter, of retweets, @mentions and hashtags. This is one of the factors which can discourage new users of what is, at heart, a very simple technology. Rather than spending time trying to familiarise participants with this jargon, Tristram stuck to a short introduction, then had them all sign up to Twitter and start playing with it straight away.

The introduction focused on how Twitter is useful to researchers. At conferences, it provides what is known as a ‘back channel’, allowing delegates to discuss and debate talks as they happen. It has traditionally been thought of as rude to get your laptop or phone out during a talk, but it is increasingly the case that those who do are more engaged, through their online discussion, than those who do not.

There are knock-on benefits to taking discussion online. It affords people unable to attend in person the opportunity to follow along and contribute, and enables discussion to continue seamlessly after the event. This process of extending an event beyond its physical location and scheduled time is referred to as ‘amplification’.

Twitter is also a valuable tool for building and maintaining your face-to-face networks. It makes it much easier to keep contacts up to date with your latest achievements, and in a way that is for some much more natural than the old round-robin newsletter or email. It allows much more interaction as well, and that can introduce you to new people with shared interests who you might otherwise never have met, even if you were at the same conference.

The simplicity of the Twitter platform, combined with Tristram’s straightforward delivery, made it very accessible to the participants. Since the workshop, we have heard from a number of participants who are continuing to use Twitter, primarily to receive updates from big names and major journals in their research areas.

Really Simple Syndication

For the second workshop, we chose to focus on Really Simple Syndication (RSS) as a mechanism for creating custom information streams tailored to individual research interests. RSS is a technology which allows users to aggregate content from a wide range of sources. This makes it much easier to follow news, journal articles and blog posts in one place. Participants were introduced to iGoogle [6] and Google Reader [7] as a place to aggregate RSS feeds and were then encouraged to track down feeds relevant to their research. Populating their pages with newly found feeds created a ‘personal newspaper’ which is automatically updated when the feed source changes. Thus RSS offers another means of filtering and managing information. It can even be used to create search feeds to monitor search engines for specific keywords associated with a research area. Unlike Twitter, RSS is not overtly social, but when used to monitor other researchers’ blogs or perhaps a collaborative project wiki, it can prompt an exchange of comments and feedback across a community.

Participants new to RSS were struck by how convenient it was to manage information with RSS but were equally disappointed when they found a useful information source that did not offer a feed.

Innovations Day Blogging Event

Building on the success of the first event, we set up a second, focusing on academic blogging and coinciding with the University of Bath's Teaching & Learning Innovations Day on Thursday 12 May 2011.

This time, we drew on local expertise and put together a panel discussion featuring four bloggers from around the university:

- Dr Tony James, Senior Lecturer, Department of Chemistry;
- Dr Declan Fleming, RSC Teacher Fellow, Department of Chemistry;
- James Doodson, PhD student, Department of Psychology; and
- Prof Bill Scott, Honorary Professor, Department of Education.

We intentionally brought together panellists with a range of experience and reasons for using blogs, and a lively, productive discussion ensued. Tony James uses his blog as a good-looking, easy-to-edit Web site [8] that publicises his research group and ties together all his other outputs, both traditional and modern. Declan Fleming blogs [9] to keep visitors to the Royal Society of Chemistry Web site up to date on his work as an RSC Teacher Fellow bringing exciting cutting-edge chemistry into schools. James Doodson keeps a private blog as a journal of his developing research ideas. Bill Scott uses his blog [10] as a space to air views and ideas that might not be suitable for formal publication, and to engage in debate with others in his field.

Following the panel discussion, we ran a hands-on workshop introducing participants to blogging using the free WordPress.com service [11].

We wanted to emphasise the benefits of blogging beyond the obvious advantages of promoting one's own research. Blogging is really useful as a way to get your ideas out on 'paper', which has a number of bonuses. To start with, you have to get them into a coherent structure just in order to write them down, which makes it much easier to fit them all together. Having done so, you can look at them in a more detached light and see what works, what does not and what needs to be added. It is much easier to assess your own ideas on reviewing them. In addition to this, getting your ideas out into the light of day gives others an opportunity to see them as well. Feedback from others can be invaluable in the early stages of developing an idea, and a blog provides a nice informal setting in which you can air those ideas with a minimal risk.

Overall, participants were very impressed with how quickly they were able to get started and how easily they could make their new blog look and feel the way they wanted. It will be interesting to follow up with them to find out how they are progressing.

Discussion

Finding Expert Users

Currently take-up is patchy and although researchers are broadly supportive of the social media in principle, the majority do not see such tools as particularly important [4]. It can therefore be difficult to find existing users to share their experiences with novices, especially within an institution.

However, we found online networking very useful in this respect. Through Twitter we were able to find several social media users of various levels of experience, all of whom have been very keen to support us and contribute where they could.

Social Media Publicity

An event is no use if no one knows about it. In addition, not everyone who wants to attend in person will be able to. In keeping with the Connected Researcher theme, we chose to use several social media channels to publicise and amplify the event.

A couple of weeks in advance of the first event, we agreed on a Twitter hashtag, #bathcr, and began talking about it online to build awareness and get suggestions on what material to include. The university communications team picked up on the launch event, publishing an announcement on the internal home page and promoting the event on the university's own Twitter feed (@UniofBath).

Thanks to this approach, we had participation over Twitter from people both in the room, in the rest of the University and around the country. We even had a mention in the *Times Higher Education*:

*@timeshighered: RT @jezcope Hooley: Social media isn't about the technology, it's about the people #bathcr <-- so true. And hello to all @ #bathcr *waves**

As well as informing our connections around the country what we were doing, this was picked up by a few existing Twitter users on campus, who contributed either by showing up in person or by welcoming our fledgling twitterers online.

Amplification

We are very aware (popular opinion of students notwithstanding) that research students have a lot of demands on their time and many who would like to learn more about social media cannot always spare the time to attend workshops. We are therefore ensuring that all slides and hand-outs from face-to-face sessions are also available online through our space on the University's wiki. We are also broadcasting highlights from each event live on Twitter (for existing Twitter users, our hashtag is #bathcr), attracting contributions both from our own researchers and researchers and support staff around the country.

Choosing the Right Service

One potentially difficult issue is the choice of which service to use in a particular category. For example, our blogging workshop focused on the free WordPress.com service. WordPress is, however, only one of a large number of excellent blogging platforms, including Blogger (owned by Google), Posterous, Tumblr, Movable Type, LiveJournal and many more.

In addition, some of these platforms allow you to host a blog on a private Web server: the University of Bath has its own blogging platform based on WordPress. The choice between services run by private companies (such as Twitter) and those hosted internally by researchers' own institutions can be particularly difficult.

Any privately run service can theoretically fail or change without notice, so it is important to be aware of this risk. Although it was tempting to focus on the University blogging platform, relying on the added level of support we can expect from our Web

services team, we felt that it was more important that our researchers had the freedom to take their blog with them, if and when they move to another institution.

In the end, it was our focus on practice over technology that got us round this issue. We emphasised the general skills involved, and indeed several participants in the blogging workshop took part successfully using other services.

Encouraging Network Building

A key part of our plan to encourage adoption of social media within the University is to build up a community of practice. However, since it is not our intention to promote the technology for its own sake, it does not make sense to build a single network in which the main common interest is use of social media. Researchers typically network with other members of their discipline rather than other members of their university, so to have a lasting impact it is these disciplinary networks which we need to penetrate.

Future Plans

We have several more workshops planned, of which the next will focus on so-called social citation tools (such as Mendeley, Zotero, citeulike and Connotea) which allow shared bibliographic databases to be built by individuals, research groups and whole communities. We will also be further building our wiki of resources. We are starting to build a library of 'why-to' videos featuring successful academics talking about their use of social media. We may augment them with a number of short, focused video tutorials introducing specific tools and their benefits.

Finally, we will be following up with delegates to previous workshops, to find out what impact social media has had on their work. We hope that they will be willing to share their own experience with each other, and perhaps contribute case studies to guide others in making the best use of social media.

Conclusions

The social web is built around information discovery, networking and collaboration, precisely the skills required of a modern researcher. Social media tools are not yet widely used in Higher Education, but there is already a keen minority of researchers who use them regularly and to good effect, and a clear interest in the subject from non-users. The key to encouraging wider adoption is lowering the cost of adoption: researchers are busy people and most have neither the time nor the inclination independently to find and learn the tools which would be useful to them.

We have tackled this by bringing in researchers who use social media in their day-to-day work to demonstrate the specific benefits available to social media users. Because they are so scarce at present, and involved in disciplinary rather than institutional networks, local 'experts' can be difficult to find, but they are there and, for the most part, keen to help.

We have run hands-on workshops to overcome perceived barriers to adoption by providing a safe and supportive environment in which to experiment. These workshops have been very participant-led with little step-by-step guidance needed from workshop leaders, which emphasises the fact that most social media tools are very easy to get started with.

Throughout, we have been clear about the benefits, honest about the risks and focused on practices rather than technologies. This approach has helped our participants to trust that social media will be of genuine use to them in their work.

We would like to encourage our readers to give social media a try if they have not already, and to contribute to events like ours at their own institutions. It is only by building a critical mass of users across the sector that we can realise the potential of these exciting new tools.

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