Using social media: the 4 *C*s

curation · conversation · collaboration · communication

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This resource is designed as a practical guide. It suggests ways for researchers to use social media for serious purposes.

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Anthony Haynes

Introduction and aims

The proliferation of social media tools such as Twitter, blogging platforms and networking websites like Facebook and LinkedIn is a blessing for researchers. It can, however, sometimes seem like a curse or at least a distraction unless you have a strategy in place to make best use of them. Taking the time to develop such a strategy not only helps to increase your productivity, it can also make research more collaborative, more creative and above all more fun.

This guide is an introduction to some of the ways in which social media tools can help you to manage information, to engage with others and to improve the quality of your work. What follow are the four Cs of social media for academics. Instead of presenting you with an exhaustive list of tools, this resource provides a set of examples of the four main functions that are the bread and butter of an academic's craft, namely:

1. Curation
2. Conversation
3. Collaboration
4. Communication

Before we begin, remember that this is an evolving area in academia as well as in other professions. It may be that you prefer to stick to the status quo, particularly when it comes to conversing and communicating with others about their research. There's no harm in experimenting though. Just make sure to think carefully about how

you want your professional online identity to appear to colleagues as well as to potential future employers.

The 4 Cs of Social Media for Academics

Curation[1]

Information, information. It's everywhere and it's often overwhelming. How can you keep on top of all the new articles that appear in your field? How do you remember which websites to check and when on earth new content is supposed to appear? And how can you easily access the information you curate in the future? Luckily, there are some great applications that allow you to do all this and much more.

Bookmarking tools are a great way to start and many have social extensions that allow you to share with others. Bookmarking managers have evolved from static lists of websites in user-created folders to flexible, customisable and searchable databases of online resources and content.

There are several advantages to moving away from the static approach to bookmarking. First of all, if you use one of the classic

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[1] 'Curation' here refers to digital curation, i.e. collecting, archiving and maintaining digital information and sources for use in your research. Examples of sources include blog posts, online journal articles, and posts on twitter.

services like Delicious, they allow you to save and access links from anywhere through your personal account. Secondly, you can follow other users' bookmarks and share your own. So if you're interested in a particular topic, you can search for shared bookmark collections and avoid having to curate from scratch. Thirdly, tags are much more forgiving than folders. You can add multiple tags to links and later you can search by tags and/or content. Finally, many bookmarking managers include a variety of archiving tools that allow you to take snapshots of pages, save the date when the link was bookmarked, and add annotations (even sticky notes and highlighted sections in the case of Diigo). This flexibility is great for researchers in building an archive of online materials that helps to overcome the ephemeral nature of many online sources.

RSS feeds, Rich Site Summary, are a great way to keep up-to-date with new content from websites that you like to follow. Paired with an RSS reader, such as Google Reader, they allow you to essentially set up a homepage that brings in feeds from all sorts of websites that you like to be updated about. One of the great things for academics is that many journals and academic databases also offer this service. In practice this means new content from specific journals makes its way to your homepage. You can also set up specific search alerts based on keywords of your choice (for example, 'electrospinning', 'multidimensional NMR spectroscopy' or, more broadly, 'biopharmaceutical engineering'). Of course, you can get journals and literature databases to email you whenever this content appears. What is great about aggregators is that you don't have to be bombarded with email updates any more. Instead, you can set aside

time in your day or week to get on top of new material.

The screenshot below (Fig.1)shows my Google Reader homepage from April 2012. On the left, you can see some of the categories of sources I like to read (Blogs, Journal search alerts and specific journals). The main screen shows all new articles that match the search for environmental AND investment AND behaviour.
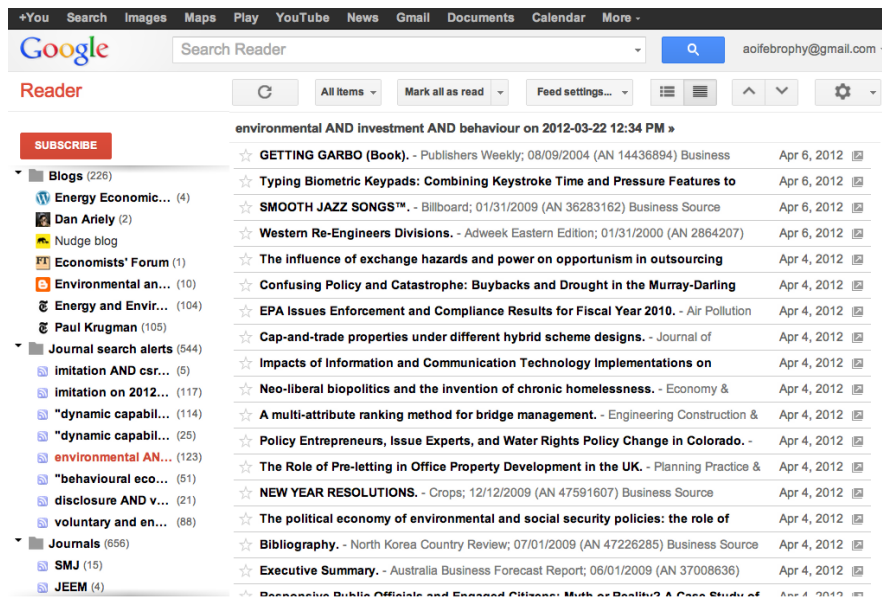

Fig. 1: Google Reader page

This search was set up using EBSCO Business Source Complete but there are many other academic databases that also have this function, for example ISI Web of Knowledge. The easiest way to connect your searches to Google Reader is to first perform the search in your database of choice. You can then save your search (to do this, you will usually need to create a personal account). Once your search has been saved, there should be an RSS feed link or an XML button. Copy the URL for the RSS feed directly or click on the XML button. In the case of the latter, a new page with the search alert data will

appear. Copy the URL in your browser address bar. Once you have the URL you can add this directly to Google Reader or any other RSS reader. In Google Reader, you do this by clicking on the Subscribe button (top left) and pasting the URL.

Several other tools allow you to integrate updates from websites as well as social media platforms such as Facebook and twitter into customised homepages or magazines (e.g. Flipboard). Others such as Storify, Scoop.it and Paper.li focus on sharing this content with others. You could decide for instance that you want to curate content on climate change policymaking and then share this content as a newspaper or magazine with your online network. This adds value for you and for others and it also allows you to start a conversation about your research area with others. This brings us to our second C.

Conversation

The traditional ways of becoming part of a research conversation, through attending conferences and publishing in peer-reviewed journals, are tried and tested but also typically slow means of conversing with others in your field. Social media tools can help you to connect to other researchers and wider audiences much more quickly than before. We've already looked at how curating information on topics can help you to start a conversation. Blogging, networking sites and twitter are other ways of sharing your thoughts and research results as well as finding the right people to converse

with.

Blogs are easy to set up (see platforms like Wordpress, Tumblr, Blogger) but difficult to sustain. While it's great if you can find the time to regularly post about your research or related issues on your own personal blog, this isn't the only way of contributing to the blogosphere. Find out if there are group blogs in your area. These can be a great way of reaching a wider audience and reducing the pressure on you to produce content on a regular basis. If you can't find a blog that you'd like to contribute to, think about collaborating with others in your department or academic association.

Twitter is often referred to as micro-blogging but it really can be much more than that. Most organisations and a lot of forward-looking academics have a presence on twitter these days. Following them can be a great way to keep up-to-date with emerging topics and trends. Tools such as Listorious can help you to identify who to follow in areas of interest to you to start with. The more tech-savvy conferences facilitate twitter discussions by providing participants with hashtags for sessions. Academic conferences tend to be behind the curve on this front but think about suggesting this to conference organisers when you can. It's easy to administer and it helps participants to interact with each other and to continue conversations beyond the conference. Once you've found your place on twitter, it can also be a great way of quickly getting feedback on an idea from your network (on the applicability of using a certain approach to a problem, say – or whether the working title for our presentation will make sense to a multidisciplinary audience).

Finally, remember that traditional and new ways of conversing in your field are complementary. They don't substitute for each other.

Collaboration

Online tools also make working with others more flexible, be it your supervisor who works in the same building or a colleague you're writing a paper with who happens to live on the other side of the world. There are some general tools like Dropbox that allow you to easily share files through folders that sync automatically so you can be sure you're always accessing the latest versions. Files are accessible from your computer but also online and through mobile applications. Evernote works on a similar principle but is more like a scrapbook. You can clip websites, images and articles into notebooks, add your own ideas and then share selected notebooks with others. Again, you can access files from anywhere and these files sync automatically when you're online. Some colleagues and supervisors may need a push to use these tools instead of sharing files by email. But the benefits far outweigh any time spent setting up. And a quick demonstration or trial run usually calms any doubts.

Below (Fig. 2) is a screenshot of one of my Evernote notebooks. This notebook is a collection of online news and blog articles about business and energy use. Once you install Evernote, you will have an Evernote icon that appears to the right of your browser address bar. When you see an article that you want to save for reading offline (or

to make sure that you have the date of clipping and source information), click on the icon and it will prompt you to choose a notebook, add tags and any comments.
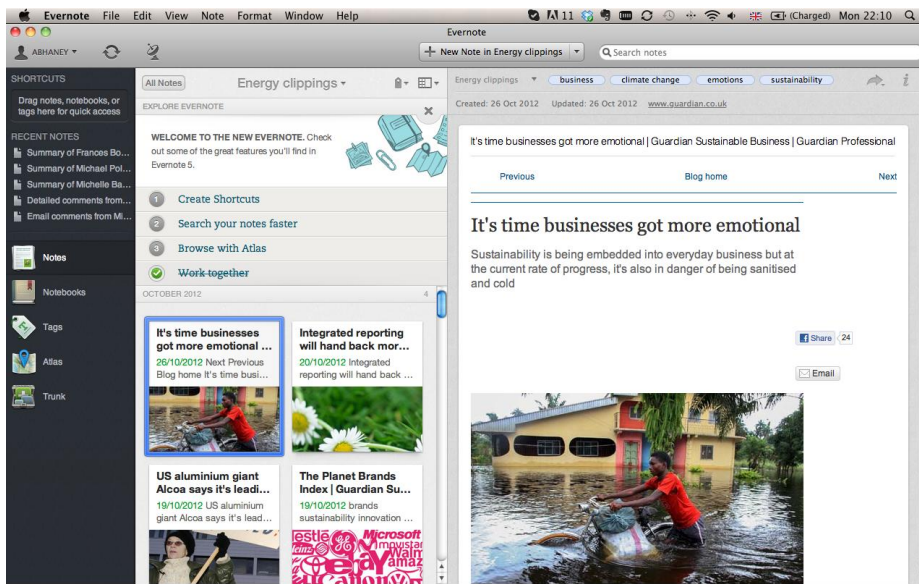
Fig. 2: Evernote page

There are also several research-specific tools out there that act as reference managers but also facilitate collaboration. Mendeley and Qiqqa are the main examples. They sit somewhere between a traditional reference manager like Endnote and applications like Evernote that allow you to take clippings from the web and easily share your library with others. Both also harness peer recommendations as a means of helping you to decide what to read next.

All of these tools of course have the bonus of making it easier for you to access notes, files, literature and bookmarks from any computer or mobile device. So even if you don't use them as a means of collaborating initially, they are well worth using to improve your

own project management process.

Communication

All of the previous Cs included an element or two of communication. But there are a couple of additional tools you might want to add to your portfolio, particularly as your work develops and you want to reach wider audiences.

A good foundation for this is a professional online network. There are several services to choose from, including Facebook and LinkedIn as well as more research-specific services such as Academia.edu. It may be worthwhile having profiles on more than one depending on the audiences you're trying to reach. For example, Academia.edu is gaining more and more members within the academic community. LinkedIn, however, allows you to connect with a more diverse network. This may include policymakers as well contacts in industry.

Once you're happy with your online network, you can use a number of complementary services to communicate your research both within your own network and more widely. For example, you can link your twitter feed to your Facebook or LinkedIn profiles to keep your network up-to-date on the papers and presentations you produce. If you want to share presentations, services such as Slideshare, Prezi and Youtube host presentations and videos that can easily be linked to.

Further resources and reading

There are new social media tools emerging all the time. The following resources give you an idea of where to find out about these tools, how to go about comparing them and how to think about applying them in an academic setting.

Curation

"[A review of social bookmarking and other link curation tools](#)" by Julie Nile Petersen (14 August 2011) on twrctank.com – gives a nice overview of the pros and cons of a number of tools on dimensions such as ease of use, annotation capabilities, ease of sharing with others.

"[Five Best Bookmark Management Tools](#)" by Jason Fitzpatrick, (16 May 2010) on lifehacker.com provides a brief rundown of popular bookmark management tools with embedded video demonstrations.

Conversation

"[Top 10 Free Online Blogging Platforms](#)" by Sufyan bin Uzayr, (13 March 2012) on sixrevisions.com gives a brief profile of free tools for blogging with a short description of strengths and weaknesses.

"Using Twitter in University Research, Teaching and Impact Activities" by Amy Mollett, Danielle Moran, and Patrick Dunleavy is produced by LSE Public Policy Group and LSE Impact of Social Sciences blog in 2011.

Collaboration

"Comparison of reference management software" from Wikipedia offers an extensive list of reference management tools with links and brief profiles on each.

Communication

"Social networks for academics proliferate, despite some doubts" by Max Whittaker for The Chronicle (29 April 2012) gives examples of academics using social networks, with a focus on Academia.edu.

"Going viral: using social media to publicise academic research", by Kyle Christie for The Guardian (11 April 2011) is example of two PhD students using Youtube and twitter to share their research experiment

General

The "New Media for Researchers" blog curated by the University of Cambridge Judge Business School Information & Library Services provides a series of bulletins on emerging tools for researchers in the social/new media space and is regularly updated.

In particular, check out the 30 new media tools post (18 May 2012) for a helpful overview of a range of tools and associated links.

Handbook of social media for researchers and supervisors by Shailey Minocha and Marian Petre of the Centre for Research in Computing, Open University (published by Vitae Innovate, 2012), offers detailed coverage of a wide range of social media tools including personae of researchers and supervisors using tools in different ways. The personae in particular bring the tools to life and emphasise that there are various possible levels of engagement.

"I'm an academic and desperately need an online presence, where do I start?" by Salma Patel on the LSE Impact of Social Sciences Blog (10 August 2012) provides an excellent overview of practical tips on getting started with several social media tools, specifically aimed at academics.

"The LSE Impact of Social Science" blog is itself a great example of a collaborative blogging platform for academics in the social sciences.

The Guardian's Higher Education Network gathers material related

to higher education, including live chats, blog posts and other articles. It often features pieces related to use of new technology in education.

Two recent articles on academic blogging:

- "Don't doubt the value of blogging in academic publishing" by Sarah-Louise Quinnell for The Guardian (20 September 2011);
- "Academic blogging: minority scholars cannot afford to be silent" by Denise Horn for The Guardian (12 July 2012).

The Chronicle of Higher Education's blog "Wired Campus" features news on technology and education.

Times Higher Education is also a good place to keep up-to-date with new developments in technology and higher education. They don't have a blog dedicated to these issues but you can easily add their RSS feeds to a reader of your choice. An example of a recent article on blogging and social media for academics is "Blog-standard turn-offs for social media neophytes" by Chris Parr (1 November 2012).