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Engaging Others

External Communications and Social Media

by

Hearing the Voice

Durham University

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‘External Communications and Social Media’
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External Communications and Social Media

Disseminating research findings and communicating with members of the public, special interest groups and other key stakeholders is an important aspect of any research project. This Project Short reflects on the communication strategy developed by Hearing the Voice and provides some practical recommendations on how to use various forms of social media and other online communication tools in order to maximise the reach of your research.

Social media and online communications: Why bother?

The main priority for any academic research project is the production of high-quality, impactful research outputs, and having a lively and engaging online presence is often seen as something that is unimportant (mere 'window dressing') in comparison with this goal. However, there are a number of reasons why it is useful to embrace the use of social media as part of your project's communications strategy. For example:

◊ **Researchers can't rely on publishing in peer-reviewed journals in order to reach the public.** Many journals require expensive subscriptions (which create a barrier to access) and the language and parlance of academic journals (even open access ones) can be obscure and confusing to the lay reader. Providing an accessible summary of a key journal article or some brief reflections on work in progress in a project blog can help your research reach a wider audience. Blogging or tweeting about a paper can also cause a large increase in the number of abstract views and downloads in the same month.

◊ **Social media can attract new audiences to project events.** Twitter, Facebook and the blogosphere provide a quick and effective means of advertising forthcoming seminars, conferences and workshops to groups that may not become aware of them through the usual university channels.

◊ Having a strong online presence can **increase the public profile** of your research project, sparking **new collaborations** and allowing your research to **inform and be informed** by other research groups, even before the publication of official outputs.

◊ **Reputation-building and skills development**: blogging can help expand your research team's readership and allow early career researchers to develop and experiment with writing styles and new ideas.

◊ Finally, there is a **moral obligation** to share the findings of research in a way that is accessible to the general public, particularly in healthcare and social science where that research is publicly funded.

Getting started: A communications tool-kit

What audience are we trying to reach? What forms of social media do these people typically use? Are they more likely to subscribe to a blog via email, or do they prefer the brevity, immediacy and accessibility of Twitter and Facebook? These are some of the questions we asked ourselves when developing the communications plan for Hearing the Voice. The strategy that resulted contains four key elements, which we believe constitutes a transferable communications tool-kit for any academic research project. These are: a website, a blog, a Twitter account and a project e-bulletin.

TIP: Invest time & resources on the development of a project brand, logo or graphic device which can be used to unify your website, blog & twitter profile.

1: The website

The Hearing the Voice website (www.dur.ac.uk/hearingthevoice) serves as a crucial source of information about our research into voice-hearing, and is often the first point of call for enquiries about the project. Developed and maintained by the Project Coordinator, it is hosted on the Durham University web site and contains a brief introduction to the aims and objectives of our research, information about our research team, and a description of our different work packages, as well as a publications page that includes links to our open-access publications. Apart from the publications section, we chose to keep the content of these pages relatively static. This decision was made partly as a result of the restrictions on content and style imposed by the University's content management system, but also because we wanted our blog to serve as a dynamic record of the progress of our research, our conferences, workshops and seminars and other public engagement activities.

When planning a website for a research project, it is useful to bear in mind the following issues:

- ◊ Does your research project have a **communications budget** that contains funds which could be used to hire a website developer to create a website? If not, think about the staff member who will be responsible for developing and maintaining the site. What kinds of skills does s/he have? Do they require any specific training?
- ◊ **Where will your website be hosted?** If your university is hosting the site, this may result in restriction in the kinds of content that can be included, as well as in the kind of web development software that can be used. If you choose for the site to be externally hosted, consider whether your IT service will provide technical support and to what extent you need this.
- ◊ How often will the site need to be **updated** and how long does it take for changes to take effect?
- ◊ What kind of **images** and **logos** will be used on the site? You may wish to include the logos of other institutions in order to reflect the multi-partner nature of a research project. The use of lots of images can help to make the site more engaging, but consider whether you need permission to reproduce them online.

2: The blog

The Hearing the Voice blog (www.hearingthevoice.org) presents a mix of opinion, news and other types of content related to voice-hearing and other unusual mental states. Posts appear in reverse chronological order so that the first entries you see are usually the most recent ones. One of the distinctive features of our blog is that its **content** isn't exclusively academic. Although it does contain conference reports, reflections on work in progress and articles about project outputs, it also contains advertisements for events such as workshops, seminars, conferences, art exhibitions, film festivals and training courses run by service user and advocacy groups, as well as

> “*Twitter is essential to our communications strategy, enabling us to reach a large and multi-disciplinary audience.*”

guest pieces by artists and composers from other institutions.

Significant space on the blog is also devoted to providing **support information** for people who find their voices distressing. For example, there is a 'Frequently Asked Questions' and 'Looking for Support?' section, which includes an interactive map of peer support groups for people who hear voices in Scotland and the North-East of England. The blog's diverse content, and its mix of academic and non-academic news items, make it a useful resource for anyone with an interest in hearing voices. Our readers include hallucinations researchers, clinicians, mental health professionals and voice-hearers and their families and carers.

There are plenty of free **blogging platforms** and it is possible to set up a blog for a research project within a couple of hours. The Hearing the Voice blog began life during the development phase of the project using the fully hosted version of WordPress (WordPress.com). For a charge of approximately £18 per year, we purchased a custom domain which gave us a unique web address. (This isn't necessary, but it will give your blog a shorter, more professional web address than the free domain names provided by WordPress.) As the project progressed, one of the issues that arose was the question of whether to transfer the blog from WordPress.com to the self-hosted version of WordPress (WordPress.org). In 2013, we decided to make the switch. The increased functionality of WordPress.org meant that this move was ultimately a beneficial one, but it did come at a cost. We lost some of the social networking capabilities provided by WordPress.com: for example, the 're-blogging' feature, and the inclusion of our Twitter followers in our blog subscription count.

As before, here are some issues you might consider when starting a blog for a research project:

◊ **What should we blog about?** In addition to articles by your own researchers, consider commissioning pieces wherever possible—for example, a visiting researcher or conference delegate may have an interesting take on issues related to your research that could make a great guest post. You may also want to include news items like Calls for Papers, job opportunities, and advertisements for relevant conferences, workshops and other events that may be of interest to your readers.

◊ **How often should we blog?** The Hearing the Voice blog averages 2–3 posts per week, but blogging once a week or once a fortnight is sufficient.

◊ **Will the blog be edited by a single individual or a small group?** Maintaining a dynamic blog takes time and energy, so unless you have a dedicated member of staff to do this, having a small editorial board is a good way to ensure a steady stream of content.

◊ **What contribution, if any, should doctoral and postdoctoral researchers make?** Blogging can provide early career researchers with a way to enhance their reputation and public profile, work through ideas, and hone their ability to explain complex concepts in a clear and engaging way, but research pressures and other priorities mean that it is often difficult to find time for this.

There are also a number of **practical and stylistic considerations** to bear in mind when developing a project blog. It is useful to have a simple **house style** for blog posts, so that events are advertised in a consistent way; for example, by listing the event title, topic and person, followed by the location and time. This enables people who subscribe to the blog via email to 'eyeball' the posts and extract the relevant information without having to read them in full. At Hearing the Voice, we always **embed links** (particularly links to email addresses) for presentational reasons and also to avoid spam-bots. We also use as many **images** as possible, creating a link from the image to the relevant flyer or website.

Other practical issues to consider include:

◊ How will posts be **tagged** and **categorized**? Spend some time working out a consistent system of tags and categories, as this will make your blog easier to search and help other bloggers find your content.

◊ **What to include on the blogroll?** Your blogroll could include links to other blogs on a similar topic, as well as the websites of relevant research projects, institutions, funding bodies, think tanks, governmental and charity organisations. The HtV blogroll also includes links to mental health service-user and advocacy groups like Voice Collective, Intervoice and the Hearing Voices Network both in the UK and abroad.

◊ **How will you monitor traffic to your blog?** WordPress.com provides free stats and an annual report which highlights the number of visits to your blog over the last year, as well as your top posts and most common searches. If you are using the self-hosted version of WordPress, you will need to install a plugin that enables Google Analytics (we use Google Analyticator).

3: Twitter

The LSE Public Policy Group define Twitter as 'a form of free micro-blogging which allows users to send and receive short public messages called tweets. Tweets are limited to no more than 140 characters, and can include links to blogs, web pages, images, videos and all other material online.'

Twitter is essential to the Hearing the Voice communications strategy. It enables us to reach a large and multi-disciplinary audience of academics within the UK and abroad, and functions as a great way for us to introduce our own researchers to these individuals. Mental health charities, voice-hearing networks and advocacy groups are very active on Twitter, so it also provides us with an effective means of advertising events, strengthening relationships, and reaching these groups.

A Twitter account for a research project is very easy to set up. Simply go to twitter.com/signup and enter your name, email address and a password that you're likely to remember. Choose a user name that makes your project easily identifiable, and add a brief description of the project (including the URL of your website or blog) to your Twitter profile. Upload a photo or image which can serve as your Twitter avatar. It is surprisingly important to do this; if you stick with the generic avatar provided by Twitter (the egg) people may confuse you for a spammer.

Some more practical recommendations:

- **Tweet about forthcoming events, project outputs, research articles and news items that might be of interest to anyone in your field.** It is legitimate to repeat tweets in a rephrased form throughout the week, as not all of your followers will be paying attention all the time.
- **Live-tweet** at conferences, seminars and workshops using an agreed hashtag. If you have the consent of the presenters, include a photo of the speaker or a key slide to make your tweets more interesting.
- **Build followers by following other researchers, research projects, institutions and stakeholder groups.** If someone follows you, follow them back! This is particularly important when you are starting out; once you have secured a dedicated following on Twitter you can afford to be more selective about who you return-follow.
- **Engage!** Retweet, join conversations and refer to people by Twitter username in order to draw their attention to your tweets.
- **Shorten web links**. A typical web address often takes up too many characters to be included in a tweet. Free URL shortening sites such as bitly.com provide shorter links which you can copy and paste into tweets.
- Use **hashtags** to make your tweets more visible.
- And finally, **a word of caution**: remember that what you tweet is in the public domain and therefore subject to libel laws. It is also probably best to avoid using a research project Twitter account for getting into arguments, polemicking and politicking; reserve this for tweeting in a personal capacity from your own account. You should also ensure your tweeting is in line with your institution's communication policies.

TIP: Link your Twitter account to a Facebook page & enable autoposts. This way you'll have a content rich Facebook page that requires no maintenance. Instructions on how to do this are available here: http://bit.ly/1wj5jKO

4: The e-bulletin

In addition to the blog and Twitter account, Hearing the Voice produces a bi-monthly electronic newsletter which presents consolidated information about research outputs, forthcoming workshops, seminars and conferences and other project-related activities. The newsletter provides a handy way for people who may not use Twitter or read all the posts on our blog to keep up to date with the progress of the project.

What should an electronic newsletter for a research project look like? There are plenty of email service providers (e.g., Mailchimp, Campaign Monitor) whose free options enable you to send slick and professional email campaigns. At Hearing the Voice, we use Mailchimp to generate our newsletter and manage our mailing lists. This platform provides a 'drag and drop' email designer that makes it easy to create a custom template for a newsletter that includes your university and funding body's logo. Many of its templates are also optimised for mobile devices so that you don't have to worry about making sure that your email looks good on different sized screens.

The table opposite provides some practical dos & don'ts for developing a project newsletter:

Dos	Don'ts
Send HTML email campaigns & use an email service provider like Mailchimp	Just send a lengthy email or Word or pdf attachment (no one will read it!)
Pay attention to detail. Use lots of images, embed links and spend time making the layout attractive and the content easy to read	Forget to proofread for errors
Include social sharing buttons, so that your readers can easily share your HTML newsletter on Facebook or Twitter	Neglect to link your campaigns to other forms of social media (e.g., by enabling auto-tweets)
Develop your mailing list at every opportunity. E.g. if you're holding a conference or workshop, ask delegates whether they would like to subscribe to the list as part of the registration or evaluation procedure	Subscribe people to your mailing list without their permission, pass contact details on to third parties, or use the mailing list for purposes other than the project newsletter
Create customised online subscription forms; make it easy for people to subscribe and unsubscribe to your list	Ignore requests for contact details to be updated or removed

Further resources

And finally, here are some resources which fed into the writing of this guide and which may prove useful to anyone developing a research project's external communications and social media strategy.

Dorothy Bishop,'A Gentle Introduction to Twitter for the Apprehensive Academic', Bishop Blog, 14 June 2011.

Katrina Gulliver, 'Ten Commandments of Twitter for Academics', Higher Education Chronicle, 9 May 2012

Deborah Lupton, 'Research on Academic Blogging: What does it reveal?' Simply Sociology blog, Jan 2014.

Peter Kinderman, 'Academia and Social Media', The Liverpool View, 12 June 2014.

'Using Twitter in University Research, Teaching and Impact Activities', LSE Public Policy Group, 2011.

Melissa Terras, 'The Verdict: Is blogging or tweeting about a research paper worth it?' LSE Impact Blog, 19 April 2012.

Working Knowledge is a collection of accessible and user-friendly resources dedicated to the practical ins and outs of interdisciplinary research.

Covering everything from managing a research project's social media presence to conducting experimental design 'hackathons', the series is a must-read for anyone considering funding or embarking on interdiciplinary research.

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